Happyland:
The agricultural crisis in Saskatchewan's drybelt, 1917-1927

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Abstract

In 1908, the Dominion Lands Act was amended to open for settlement some twenty-eight-million-acres of land between Calgary and Moose Jaw in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. The amendment also inaugurated the beginning of what was to become thirty-one years of crop failure and farm abandonment in the same region, commonly referred to as Palliser's Triangle.

Settlers in west-central and south-west Saskatchewan, the arid heart of the triangle, suffered horribly from crop failure and abandonment. An estimated ten thousand men, women and children fled this region between 1917 and 1927, adding to the thousands more who fled both prior to the crisis of the 1920s and afterward during the Dirty Thirties. The little-known crisis of the 1920s was the second act in a three-act tragedy which claimed the livelihoods of thousands of people. The tragedy was exacerbated by a provincial government which, for a variety of reasons, could not and would not come to terms with the crisis.

The second stage of western settlement, the era after 1908, was riddled with problems. This circumstance sets it apart from the earlier and more successful settlement years between 1896-1908. Settlers who participated in the settlement of southwestern Saskatchewan after 1908 experienced crop failure and abandonment like any other region in the province. The crisis of the 1920s raises disturbing questions about the wisdom which underpinned the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act. By considering the crisis, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the second phase of western settlement was, by many yardsticks, a failure.

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Introduction:

"It is a journey which begins with man at the peak of his spiritual powers and ends with him cloaked in the darkness of the long night of the soul."[1]

On a hot, dry day during the drought-shot summer of 1921, a raging, uncontrolled fire swept through the town of Hatton located eighty kilometers west-north-west of Maple Creek. The devastation was very nearly complete. Thirty-five homes and businesses were destroyed, including the regal two-storey, forty-two-room Forres Hotel, which sat adjacent to nine grain elevators along the rail-line that ran through Hatton. Likely unnoticed at the time, though, the conflagration also destroyed another and far more important element of frontier life: the spirit of the community. Residents of the town did not rebuild, they did not pledge to start anew nor did they promise to start over. Hatton residents gave up. According to a local historian, the fire represented "the beginning of the gradual death of the town."[2] And so on a hot, dry day during the summer of 1921, Hatton began a slow but persistent downward spiral into oblivion.

The blaze occurred almost precisely mid-way through a soul-withering drought which had begun in 1917 and would continue, with little let up, until 1927. In the years that followed the summer of 1921, drought continued the work of the fire. Both forces achieved the same ultimate end: de-population and abandonment. These two

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[1] David C. Jones, Empire of Dust: settling and abandoning the prairie drybelt (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987), 3.
[2] Prairie Echoes of Hatton: a story of Hatton and surrounding area, (no publisher, 1983) 1-3.

consequences were the physical manifestations of the wounds inflicted on the human spirit by the forces of fire and drought. The difference between drought and fire was one of quality. Drought worked much more slowly than fire. Drought was also neater and much cleaner because it did not leave behind portentous, charred and smoky remains. Unlike fire, those driven out by the drought were given options, as it were. Some residents of Hatton, for example, took their buildings with them when they abandoned the community. Some people chose the easier and time-honored, if morally suspect, option and simply walked away, leaving their homes behind to rot in the scorched earth of the drylands.

The mass abandonment of this community between 1921 and 1927 created problems for the town council. The obvious difficulty was that the town could no longer afford to function because there were no longer any ratepayers. After years of monotonous crop failure and abandonment, town councilors pleaded for tax relief in 1929 from the tax-levying Saskatchewan Assessment agency on the eve of the legendary calamity of the Dirty Thirties. Councilors explained that the village could no longer raise taxes because there were "[too many] houses being removed from the village and there [was] too much dead real estate."[3]

The drawn-out, lingering death of Hatton began with the fatal wound in 1921. The community, whose local history registers the presence of 800 people in 1920, bled for thirteen years. Mercifully, in 1934 and amidst yet another succession of crop failures, village councilors gathered in the home of Ernest Wilkinson on an empty, desolate

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[3] Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter SAB) MA, 11(a) Papers of the Department of Municipal Affairs, "Disorganized Village Records, Village of Hatton: Council Minutes, 1922-1934," 8 January 1929.

January night and agreed to ask the province to officially dissolve the village. Thus it was that Hatton voted itself out of existence.

Today, nothing much remains of the town. Two or three farms lay scattered along side grid 635 which is the main road that passes through the site where Hatton was formerly situated. Some outbuildings and a small hog farm lie to the east and some ruined vehicles lie inside a barbed wire fence that is fighting a losing battle with ditch grass. The road stretching west of where Hatton was located is, for the most part, a local access road for the oil industry. The land which surrounds the site of the dead community has been turned back to prairie. Nearby Bitter Lake is not a lake or a pond, as indicated on provincial roads maps; it is a hollow, dry socket of grass.

The echo of the community before its death, however, still sounds across time. The energy and vibrancy of the town is hinted at in the minutes of the town meetings. Councilors, for example, passed a by-law in 1924 which prohibited overly-energetic children from chasing after cars passing in the dusty streets. "This practice," council sternly warned, "must be discontinued."[4] So, on that barren empty stretch of grid 635 at the junction of the oil service road, children once played in the streets.

The unfortunate and tragic fate of Hatton serves as an example for the wider dryland region during the 1920s. Between 1917 and 1927 an estimated ten thousand men, women and children fled the drylands just ahead of the destructive forces of drought, crop failure and bankruptcy.[5] Hatton did not die alone. The dryland region from which these settlers and their families fled during these ten years stretched from the northern edge at Kindersley-Alsask down to the American border and from Shaunavon east to

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[4] Ibid., 23 October 1924.
[5] See pages 119-122 for the de-population figures.

Alberta. This region is the core, the barren, arid heart of the wider tract of land between Moose Jaw and Calgary known as Palliser's Triangle.[6] This twenty-eight-million-acre region forms the northern tip of what is called the Great American Desert, which includes much of the land in Montana, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. The history of this entire region is troubled. Crop failure and abandonment are the common threads which transcend arbitrary political boundaries.

What follows below is an examination of the crisis of the 1920s and a consideration of its implications. The drylands were thrown open to settlement for a variety of poor reasons, reasons not at all related to agriculture. At the same time, the Saskatchewan government would not countenance the existence of a problem because it feared depopulation, even as crop failure after crop failure mounted. And the settlers and RMs did the best they could to establish a new life under these pressures. If the crisis of the 1920s means anything it means that crop failure and abandonment were the rule and not the exception. The crisis of the 1920s ultimately means that the second half of the Dominion government's western settlement policy as directed by Department of Interior boss Frank Oliver was a failure.

The Canadian portion of the larger dryland region between Calgary and Moose Jaw was named for Captain John Palliser. He was an adventurer, scientist, and gentleman who undertook one of the first major expeditions into the western interior of British North America to determine the suitability of the land for agricultural purposes. His famous and oft-quoted line sums up much about what he discovered while on his expedition in 1857: much of the region south of the park-belt, he claimed, was "unfit for human habitation." R.J. Thompson, the editor of the community history for the Alsask

[6] See pages 123 and 124 for two maps which indicate the geographic area under study.

district explains that Palliser likely "crossed through our neck of the woods in a period of extreme drought and he would then be correct in his assumptions as many who experienced it in later years could testify."[7]

The chief defect of Palliser's Triangle, if it can properly be called a defect, was the simple lack of rain. Both the Canadian and American Departments of Agriculture subscribe to the basic rule of thumb that areas with twenty to thirty inches of annual precipitation can be classed as sub-humid; areas with between ten and twenty inches of annual precipitation can be properly called semi-arid; areas which have less than ten inches of annual precipitation are classed as arid.[8] Palliser's Triangle has routinely wavered in and out of the latter two designations.

Historian David Jones, for example, noted that in the twelve years prior to 1897, the precipitation levels in the Palliser's Triangle region averaged just less than nine inches of annual precipitation.[9] The forty-eight year precipitation average for the Swift Current district, from 1890 to 1938, was fifteen inches.[10] These numbers also include snowfall amounts, and so the distinction between arid and semi-arid shrinks even further when only rainfall amounts are considered. Alsask recorded the lowest rates of precipitation among Saskatchewan's fifteen weather recording stations over a thirty year period. From 1941 to 1970, the precipitation rate was 285.2 millimeters per year.[11] R.J. Thompson pokes fun at the exotic nature of the Alsask district climate: "Alsask" he

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[7] Captured Memories: a history of Alsask and surrounding school district's (Alsask: Alsask History Book Committee, 1983) v.
[8] John Bracken, Dry Farming in Western Canada (Winnipeg: Grain Growers Guide, 1921) 1.
[9] David C. Jones, Empire of Dust: the settling and abandoning of the prairie drybelt (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987) 19. By way of comparison, California's arid Death Valley receives two inches annual precipitation. See www.wrgis.usgs.gov/docs/parks/deva/weather.
[10] Ibid., 258-259.
[11] Captured Memories v.

writes, "is the driest, coldest, hottest, windiest place you have ever been at or ever may go to."[12] Call it gallows humor.

Drought is a consequence of low rainfall and Thompson describes it this way: "The earth becomes drier and drier until very little vegetation will grow...water holes, sloughs, and shallow wells dry up until they are completely empty."[13] Thompson notes that farming in this climate, and under these hopelessly depressing conditions "has been experienced...many times before, but the great drought of the thirties is generally considered to be the worst." And Thompson adds that "what little crop a homesteader grew he usually shared with the gophers and the grasshoppers."[14]

Thompson's estimation of the hazards of dryland farming seem charitable. The experience of a government-run demonstration farm in the Medicine Hat region clearly illustrates the hazards associated with agriculture in the drylands. On top of sharing the crop with grasshoppers and gophers, the wheat grown by the staff at this farm during the crop year of 1921 was also beaten by drought and excessive winds. Anything that survived the onslaught of that year was finally destroyed by hail.[15] Thus historian Barry Potyondi's observation that dryland farmers "were among the least fortunate of our settlers" seems reasonably accurate.[16]

Repeated crop failure of this quality was the impulse which underlay the abandonment of the dryland region in the 1920s. Alsask settler Joseph Adams explains that "from 1917 on, the years were dry until 1923 and at that time the first great exodus

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1921, 9.
[16] Barry Potyondi, In Palliser's Triangle: living in the grasslands, 1870-1930 (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1995), 87.

of settlers took place, the second being the Dirty Thirties."[17] Albert Anderson was one farmer who somehow managed to make it through the abandonment crisis of the 1920s only to be forced out by the drought of the 1930s. His daughter Bessie explains that during the 1920s, "our country seemed to be drying up and blowing away and many people were leaving their farms" and she adds wistfully that in the 1930s "we finally dried up and blew away too."[18] Anderson, like thousands of others during both periods of abandonment in the 1920s and 1930s, moved north into the parkbelt "where we could at least cut some firewood."[19]

The experiences of the Anderson and Adams families plainly demonstrate the reasons why settlers had been kept out of the drylands. For almost forty years, from the early 1870s to 1908, the arid regions were home, almost exclusively, to cattle ranchers. The land use policies of the Department of Interior were structured around one simple assumption: the land was best suited to cattle ranching and so the settler should be kept out of this area. According to historian David Breen, Department of Interior administrator William Pearce believed that settling the region "could not be morally or economically justified."[20] The local cattlemen's associations helped to restrict settlement in the drylands. They successfully argued that settlement "could only bring eventual ruin and hardship."[21] The ranchers were successful in keeping the settler out because, as a group, they maintained strong and amicable ties with the governing Conservative party.

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[17] Captured Memories, 163.
[18] Ibid., 167.
[19] Ibid.
[20] David Breen, The Canadian Prairie West and the Ranching Frontier, 1874-1924 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 113.
[21] Lewis G. Thomas et al, The Prairie West to 1905 : a Canadian sourcebook (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 222-223.

Unfortunately, those intimate political ties would play a not-insignificant role in settling the drylands after the Conservatives were removed from power.

The crisis of the drylands is a significant yet largely unknown event in the settlement of the west. The importance of the crisis lay in its implications. What occurred during the 1920s was the rule not the exception. When the crisis of the 1920s is compared to the legendary farm abandonment of the 1930s, the connection between the two is obvious and this contains one central implication: the Dirty Thirties were not exceptional but rather the continuation on a much larger scale of the abandonment that occurred in the drybelt during the 1920s and indeed what had occurred ever since the region was opened up for settlement in 1908. The homestead cancellation rates in the drylands are, first and always, more excessive than cancellation rates in other areas of the province. The period between 1908 and 1939 was one block of time characterized by three distinct and separate periods of consolidation or farm abandonment: 1908-1914, 1917-1927 and 1929-1939. This circumstance tends to support the conclusion that the settlement policies of Department of Interior Boss Frank Oliver were a failure. The abandonment of the 1920s was the second act of a three-act tragedy which achieved its most profound expression in the 1930s.

The province's reaction during the crisis of abandonment in the 1920s was abysmal. The Saskatchewan government repeatedly failed to assess properly the nature and magnitude of the problem and this problem with perception would exist unchanged until the calamity of the 1930s. Historian Blair Neatby argued in a 1970 collection of essays on Western Canada that the Saskatchewan government's performance during the early years of the Dirty Thirties was speedy and efficient and that the province actually prevented a

bad situation from getting worse.[22] Unseen by Neatby, however, was the fifteen-year warm-up period from 1914 to 1929, during which time the province consistently refused to address the problems associated with drought and crop failure. So, rather than being speedy and efficient, the province's actions in the early years of the Thirties were evidence of a belated capitulation to a problem which had existed in steadily worsening degrees since the drylands were opened up for settlement in 1908.

Symbolic of this failure to address the problem of the 1920s is the position which the sixteen Rural Municipalities of the drybelt occupied during the crisis. It was these small and tender local political units, not the provincial government, which took the lead role in alleviating the pressures spawned by drought and crop failure and they were almost crushed under the weight. The RMs were given the responsibility in 1917 for providing seed to settlers; in 1918, that responsibility was expanded to include fodder, flour, and coal. After five or six years of providing aid, the RMs were faced with a choice: they could either continue providing aid and go bankrupt along with the settlers, or they could stop providing aid. Several RMs came perilously close to bankruptcy because of the pressures created by the burden of relief; talk of dissolution was rampant. In one instance, the pressures created by the responsibility for aid led to open municipal revolt in the RM of Reno. The RMs chose self-preservation and stopped aid in 1922/23. The abandonment began shortly after.

There was no difficulty locating excellent source material for this history. Chapter one relies heavily on the records of the Department of Agriculture from Saskatchewan and Alberta, Sessional Papers reports for the Department of Interior, House of Commons

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[22] Blair Neatby, "The Saskatchewan Relief Commission, 1931-1934" in Donald Swainson , ed. Historical Essays on the Prairie Provinces [Donald Swainson ed.], (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), 267.

debates, and the Pope Commission. Much of the information included in Chapter One is data compiled by the statistics branches of the provincial Departments of Agriculture. There is also considerable statistical data taken from the Department of Interior. The statistics form part of the brief numeric summaries included in the annual reports of the various departments and include all manner of information on the developing west, such as rail line mileage, the number of grain elevators, and the amount of land in production. Using yield averages, wheat production totals and immigration numbers, it is shown that settlers in the drylands experienced repetitive crop failure and abandonment in far greater measure than their counterparts in other areas of the province. Much of the non-statistical source material demonstrates how the Saskatchewan government resisted any temptation toward worry over agriculture in the drylands. This information, too, is largely gleaned from the annual reports of the Departments of Agriculture. The sprinkling of newspaper and community histories is merely designed to provide background and context to the events which were occurring in the drylands between 1908 and 1914. The Pope Commission becomes the center-piece of the chapter because it confirms the idea that the land was unsuitable for farming as conditions stood at that time. The findings of the Pope Commission of 1912 stand in direct contrast to the actions and beliefs of the provincial government.

The Better Farming Commission report of 1920 serves as the center-piece for Chapter Two. This commission and its work acts as a counter-balance to the records and correspondence of the Department of Agriculture, found in the Saskatchewan Archives Board. The sources plainly show that in 1920, there were two positions which were taken regarding the crisis. The B.F.C., like the Pope Commission of 1912, essentially argued

that settlers should be removed and the land turned back to prairie, while the correspondence of the Department of Agriculture clearly demonstrates that the Saskatchewan government was not at all prepared to encourage the recommendations of the commission because of a deep rooted fear of de-population.

The final chapter employs the records of the Rural Municipalities themselves. I drove the length of the drylands, from just north of the American border to the Alsask district, stopping at randomly selected RM offices to consult their records. By using this simple bottom-to-top geographical approach, the problem of selecting worst-case-scenario-RMs was avoided. The records of the RM of Clinworth, for example, were only consulted because the office of the RM of Happyland was closed on the day I stopped and Clinworth was the nearest alternative. Altogether, I visited RM archives in Eastend, Consul, Maple Creek, Golden Prairie, Sceptre, Eatonia, Kindersley, and Marengo. There are 16 RMs in the dryland district as defined in this thesis along with several more Local Improvement Districts. Data from half of them have been assessed and evaluated.

The records of the RMs are perhaps the most valuable element of this thesis. As far as I can tell, these records have been consulted very rarely, if ever. One of the few historians who may have consulted the records of the RMs was Bruce Peel in his 1948 University of Saskatchewan Master's thesis entitled "RM 45: The Social History of a Rural Municipality." I consulted the records of the RMs only because, earlier in my research, I realized I needed a source to corroborate the idea that the drybelt abandonment was much worse than previously thought. I reasoned that if there was a problem then it must show up in the RM records. And it did.

The one RM source on which this thesis heavily relies is the Minutes of the Meetings. The Minutes are heavy, bound books which in most cases are kept in vaults at the RM offices. The minutes record the occurrences at the meetings which were held every three weeks. In all cases the entries are very brief; usually no more than three or four lines and contain only essential information. The brevity of the minutes was one of the limitations of this source. Often, for example, the minutes spoke once about matters related to the crisis but then the matter disappears from the records. The drought-induced municipal revolt in the RM of Reno in 1921 is a good example and there are others. The brevity of the minutes also made it impossible to construct personal stories or to divide the matter along racial or gendered lines though there were some exceptions, such as the story of Catherine Slovak.

The tax sale and redemption records were the other valuable source employed in this thesis. While not in good physical condition, the content of these records was just as valuable as minutes. The tax sale records are ledger-style books which record the transfer of land from one party to another. The minutes and the tax sale records are the two most valuable sources I found in my research. There were, of course, other sources such as "Seed Grain Registers" which itemize the amount of relief aid provided to the settlers in a particular RM. This source was not always available because, like the tax sale records, it too had often been lost or misplaced.

The strength of these sources lies in their universality. What appeared in the records of one RM usually appeared in the records of another and so I was able to corroborate what I found and develop certain ideas. The problems associated with financing aid, or schools, or collecting relief debt for example, were not particular problems but occurred

in all the RMs whose records I consulted. For its universality, confidence in the use of this source should be high. Also there should be no concern with partisan feeling in any of these records because they are brief and simple chronicles of the crisis in its most basic form. Essentially, the RM sources are non-political and are concerned only with the actual.

The conclusion of this thesis will emphasize two crucial points. First, the crisis of the 1920s underpinned the actions of the province in the 1930s. Second, the crisis was merely the second act in a steadily-worsening three act tragedy, an idea which contains implications of its own.

This history is important for another, simpler reason: it is a tale which has never been told. The curious thing is that no one really knows yet what went on in Saskatchewan's drybelt during this decade, not even those who were driven out. One of the striking characteristics of the various dryland community histories, for example, is that despite the enormous number of people who write about their families leaving the region in the 1920s there remains no connection in their mind that what occurred was part of a larger problem. So, one learns of Vermont's Harrison Green and his family of seven who farmed in the tragic Hatton district for eight years but harvested only one crop before quietly leaving in 1922.[23] The Green story is one of many such individual stories of abandonment in the community history of Hatton and yet the editors of the history do not address the problem of abandonment in their introduction and opening remarks. This absence of thought on abandonment tends to support the suggestion that the crisis did not register in the mind of the community. The academic historiography on dryland settlement in Saskatchewan contains similar types of conceptual lapses.

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[23] Prairie Echoes, 20.

Broadly speaking, historians have generally ignored what happened in the drybelt during the 1920s. From the early historical studies of land settlement in the 1930s up to the appearance of a separate and distinct trend of drybelt history in the 1980s, what occurred in Saskatchewan in the 1920s has at best been treated as an abstraction and at worst ignored.

The first historian to touch lightly upon the abandonment problem was Chester Martin.[24] His work on Dominion Lands policy is not a "pivotal" study in that it represented a change or a challenge to previous thought, but it does remain important because it was the first, and likely will remain, the only thorough attempt at trying to come to terms with and understand the nature of Dominion Land's policy during the settlement period, 1870 to 1930. This policy was a "many-headed monster" which went through innumerable revisions, additions, and amendments in the sixty-years of its existence and so given a study of this size and scope it becomes easier to understand Martin's treatment of the drybelt disaster.

Martin conceptualized the disaster in terms of numbers and figures. Martin described depopulation in this fashion: "In Saskatchewan, the net area pre-empted up to 1917 was 5 million acres. Thereafter, cancellations exceeded entries and reduced the net area pre-empted to about 3,703,480 acres."[25] Martin also explained that "[homestead] cancellations in Saskatchewan alone from 1911 to 1931 were 63,159 out of 110,303 entries or about 57 percent." Based on this data, Martin concluded that "by 1921, the percentage of farms in Saskatchewan over 200 acres had risen from 38.56 percent in

[24] Chester Martin 'Dominion Lands' Policy (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973).
[25] Ibid., 164.

1901 to 67.45 percent. The Process continued however, after 1918: by 1926 it had become over seventy percent."[26]

This, then, is the first attempt to try and come to terms with the disaster of the 1920's. It is not exactly gripping. Martin, however, understood through his analysis of the numbers that "the free homestead system presents a truly appalling record of casualties."[27] Martin, then, only briefly described the tragedy of the drybelt and he did so in abstract terms of numbers and figures. But he also provided a valuable framework for future historians, an entry point. But it was an entry point through which no historian would pass for another forty-three years.

1982-83 represents the high-water mark for drybelt studies. The settlement history of this period is pock-marked with studies, allusions, and references to what occurred in the south-country during the 1920s. It was during the 1980s that the classic and groundbreaking works on the area were written. The Saskatchewan experience, however, remained on the periphery. The first into the field and also, generally speaking, the historian who has devoted much of his career to the topic was the University of Calgary's David C. Jones. Jones was the first historian to put flesh on the abstract bones of Martin's observations of a generation earlier.[28]

Jones' article "We'll all be Buried Down Here in this Drybelt" was the first effort which briefly outlined the suffering, destitution, and depopulation of the Swift Current region during the dryland crisis of the 1920s. Jones develops answers to many of those

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[26] Ibid., 165
[27] Ibid., 240.
[28] David C. Jones, "We'll all be Buried Down Here in This Drybelt" *Saskatchewan History*, vol. 35, Spring 1982, no. 2, 50. Jones' first article dealing generally with the dryland crisis came in 1978 with the publication of "School and School Disintegration in the Alberta Drybelt of the Twenties" *Prairie Forum,* vol. 30, no. 1, Spring, 1978, 1-24. It dealt only peripherally with the crisis of crop failure and abandonment.

lingering questions left hanging by Chester Martin in 1939. Jones crisply illuminates the basic problem of the crisis and how it developed. But because of the articles brevity, Jones necessarily leaves several threads of inquiry un-pursued and these ideas are important to a fuller understanding of this particular problem.

Jones removes himself from the Saskatchewan experience during the drybelt crisis one step further in Empire of Dust.[29] The general characterization: Alberta is the painting and Saskatchewan is the wall on which the painting is hung. The point is the painting not the wall. Jones subtitled his study: "the settling and abandonment of the prairie drybelt," but he limits his study largely to what occurred in Alberta. The events in Saskatchewan register only as a backdrop to the horrendous calamity of what occurred in Alberta.

It is the use of certain sources which relegates the Saskatchewan experience to the periphery. Jones, for example, argues that Alberta lost more people from a smaller area in the 1920s than Saskatchewan did during the 1930s.[30] He adopted this line of argument in his 1982 article, when he wrote that Saskatchewan lost an estimated three thousand people whereas Alberta lost close to seventeen thousand during the abandonment of the 1920s.[31] In another instance, the Canadian Census indicates that Saskatchewan's drybelt population remained essentially stable during the 1920s.[32] This contains the implication that the severity of the dryland crisis altered itself at the Alberta-Saskatchewan border

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[29] In between his 1982 article and his 1987 book, Jones published a very useful history of the drybelt in documents "We'll all be Buried Down Here in This Drybelt: the prairie dryland disaster, 1917 to 1926 (Calgary: Alberta Records Publication Board, 1986).

[30] Jones, Empire, 220.

[31] Ibid., "We'll All Be Buried," 51. In Jones' earlier 1978 article, he argued that south-east Alberta lost 1,851 families during the crisis which, conservatively estimated (husband, wife, and child) means 5,553 people. This number puts the Alberta crisis on the same level as Saskatchewan. See Jones, "Schools and School Disintegration in the Alberta Dry Belt During the Twenties" *Prairie Forum*, vol. 3 no. 1, Spring 1978, 16. This apparent discrepancy between his 1978 work his later 1982/1987 work indicates that any attempt to establish exactly how many people abandoned the drybelt in either Alberta or Saskatchewan is almost impossible, short of consulting the records of the Department of Interior to determine the length of stay of each homesteader on each quarter section of land.

[32] Jones, Empire, 245

which runs directly through the middle of Palliser's Triangle. This is a strange conceptual proposition derived largely from the unreliability of the source itself. Alongside the obvious difficulty of accurately tracking the highly-transient settler population of the early settlement years, historian Barry Potyondi notes that the "vast expanses" of the drybelt region "make this source [the census] of limited value."[33]

Jones' work, though, remains the crucial starting point for an understanding of the drylands crisis in both Alberta and Saskatchewan. His early work in 1982 was followed by research from David Breen, Barry Potyondi, D.M.Loveridge, and Gerald Freisen. All of these historians hint at, mention, or in some way attempt to clear away the dust which had collected around the crisis of the 1920s.

The study by Potyondi and Loveridge was commissioned by Parks Canada and is a general survey of the Grassland National Park area. Like Jones in 1982, Potyondi and Loveridge shed light on what happened in the region but are restricted by the limitations of time and space. Their study of the drybelt is limited to the Grasslands National Park region which is located just east of Shaunavon, a region not under consideration in this thesis. While both authors rightfully argue that what occurred here can easily be "extrapolated" to cover the entire region, Potyondi and Loveridge work within the restrictive framework of 1908-1914, with only passing reference to what occurred after this period.

Potyondi and Loveridge seem almost unaware of the abandonment problem of the 1920s. While they cite the Better Farming Commission's report of 1921, for

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[33] Barry Potyondi, and D.M. Loveridge From Wood Mountain to Whitemud: a historical survey of the Grasslands National Park Area (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch/Environment Canada. 1983) 175. The figures from the Department of Municipal Affairs are somewhat more reliable because they are based on the amount of taxable land in production in each year, which necessarily requires a correspondingly accurate count of the number of farmers in each RM.

example, they do so only as it relates to the commission's recommendations for agricultural research. Nowhere do they indicate that the central point of the report is the recommendation to amend the Dominion Lands Act to pave the way for the removal of settlers "from inferior lands to better lands." The work by Potyondi and Loveridge was complemented by the history written by David Breen.[34]

David Breen's study on the south-west and cattle ranching was another pivotal work which appeared during the mid 1980s. His study considers agrarian settlement though only as it related to the cattle industry. While Breen is highly critical of the 1908 amendment which opened the drylands to settlement (a criticism shared by Potyondi, Loveridge, Martin and Friesen) Breen carries his ideas only up to 1922, the year when the actual evacuation began. And since the focus of Breen's study is the cattle rancher, not the settler, the abandonment of the 1920s recedes here as well.

In 1995, Barry Potyondi published another study, this time a brief survey of the drybelt from the standpoint of environmental history. The closest he comes to acknowledging the drybelt evacuation is when he suggests that Maple Creek lost upwards of sixty-percent of its homesteaders between 1910 and 1930.While these figures are certainly supported by and reflected in Chester Martin's study, Potyondi's figures are based on a thirty-year old environmental/social history from Chicago.[35] This simply means Potyondi was not accessing the source material which would reveal the full extent of the crisis in the 1920s.

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[34] David Breen, The Canadian West and the Ranching Frontier, 1875-1922 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

[35] Potyondi, In Palliser's Triangle: Living in the Grasslands, 1850-1930 (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1995), 93-94.

The drybelt gets a reasonable airing in Gerald Friesen's well-known 1984 survey of the west, The Canadian Prairies: a history.[36] At the same time as this attention is given, Friesen also breaks out of the common conceptual framework of Saskatchewan history and is not limited by the time barriers which inhibited previous historians. Friesen, for example, refreshingly views the entire period from 1900-1930 as a single block of time and as such, avoids the problem of settlement history "ending" at 1914, or 1919 or 1922, where many of the histories mentioned here have their arbitrary stop dates. By not focusing on the "Roaring Twenties" as a distinct block of time, Friesen is left with the freedom to accommodate the crisis into his "conceptual framework." Again, however, Freisen's mention of the crisis is just that: a mention. He necessarily spends little time in his broad survey on this specific point. He calls the settlement of the drybelt area "a great error in Canadian domestic policy" and adds that this led to "several thousand farms" being abandoned in the 1920s.[37]

An attempt at explaining the history of Saskatchewan's dryland crisis, then, has never been made. Lingering lines of inquiry have never been explored and related questions never answered. This thesis will, in part, fill that void and provide an examination of the event, emphasizing different levels of the crisis in each chapter.

The sheer magnitude of the crisis makes this story important. But it remains important for other reasons. It is the tale of an estimated ten thousand men and women trying to farm land that, at that time, should not have been open to settlement; it is a tale of a provincial administration that would not recognize the problem; it is the tale of a

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[36] Gerald Freisen, The Canadian Prairies: a history (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
[37] Ibid., 328-331.

young rural Saskatchewan threatened with extinction. It is a tale of the failure of the Last Best West.

Chapter One:

"Cursed be the man that trusteth in man...for he shall be like the heath in the desert and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness in a salt land and not inhabited."

- **Jeremiah 17:5**

Opening the drylands to settlement resulted from the work of one man: Frank Oliver, the Minister of Interior from 1905 to 1911. Oliver's 1908 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act was a creation entirely of his own devising and this single piece of legislation represents far more than what its meager physical contents suggest. The brief and summary amendment represented an absolute repudiation of almost thirty-eight years of land use policy. From the 1870s until 1908, the area was administered as a cattle ranching preserve. But Oliver's amendment overturned the idea that the region was best left to ranchers and that it should not or could not be farmed. Oliver had a variety of reasons for his rejection of the land use policy of his predecessors. Some of those reasons were justifiable and others were not. Justifications of the latter sort, unfortunately, were upper most in Oliver's mind when he crafted the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act.

Swift Current and Maple Creek served as the dryland's two principal communities in 1908. The rest of the area from the American border up to Kindersley and from the Alberta border east to Moose Jaw remained, for the most part, empty. Prior to opening

the region for settlement, Oliver noted that, outside Maple Creek and Swift Current, the infrastructure of the entire region consisted of "a railway and two roads."[38]

It was not an accident that the region between Calgary and Moose Jaw was virtually empty. Oliver's predecessor Clifford Sifton, and before him men like Interior lands manager William Pearce, ensured that the cattle rancher would be favored with profitable and agreeable grazing leases because the region was deemed unfit for agriculture.[39] The belief that the area was excessively dry formed the basis for the assumptions around which land use policy for the drylands was structured from the mid-1870s to 1908: the rancher was in and the settler was out. Historian David Jones noted that the farmers would eventually be allowed to settle in the region, but that would occur slowly and gradually and only after agricultural practices such as irrigation were further developed.[40]

This gradualist approach can be seen in the Conservative government's legislation affecting the drylands. In 1886, for example, the "no-settlement" clause was dropped from all newly-issued grazing leases which in turn allowed for small-scale settlement.[41] In 1892, the Conservatives announced that all the old "closed" grazing leases would be cancelled in four years, though ranchers were given the option of purchasing these leases for $1.25 per acre to keep them closed to settlers.[42] This gradualist approach, however, did not mean that the region was open for settlement. For all intents and purposes, the south-country remained closed. This closure-mentality persisted during Liberal Clifford

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[38] Canada, House of Commons Debates, 23 June 1908, 11143-11144.
[39] David C. Jones, Empire of Dust: settling and abandoning the prairie drybelt (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987), 10, 21.
[40] Ibid., 10.
[41] Lewis G. Thomas, The Prairie West to 1905: a Canadian Sourcebook (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), 224.
[42] Ibid., 224.

Sifton's term as Interior boss; he never once doubted that the region was best left to the rancher.[43]

Frank Oliver, though, was the very antithesis of Sifton. Oliver, who became Interior Minister upon Sifton's resignation in 1905, had zero tolerance for the latter's practice of courting and molly-coddling the cattle rancher. Historian Pierre Berton has crafted a revealing portrait of the two men: Sifton was "an Ottawa sophisticate," where Oliver was a "cadaverous [and] rough-hewn" newspaper editor; Sifton was a "pillar of the Ottawa Hunt," while Oliver was President of the Edmonton Bicycle Club; Sifton was emotionally conservative where Oliver was "explosive."[44] Oliver also had one distinction which Sifton did not possess. According to the Calgary *Herald*, Oliver's newspaper, the Edmonton *Bulletin,* was "the meanest paper published by the meanest man in Canada."[45]

Oliver had long believed in settler's rights. "Unrestricted settlement" was one of the messages which blared forth from the pages of the Edmonton *Bulletin*. Underneath that sentiment, though, lay a rattlesnake's nest of thoughts and assumptions about ranchers and it was from this nest that the 1908 amendment to the Dominion Lands Act developed.

Simply put, Oliver did not like cattlemen though this dislike was mostly political, not personal. The way Oliver saw it, ranchers were "a landed and reactionary establishment" with too-strong ties to the Conservative party.[46] In many ways, Oliver's ideas were entirely in-step with the mood of the country. Settlers had long been viewed as "the emblem of democracy and progress"; they were the "underdog" battling the "the

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[43] Ibid., 225.
[44] Pierre Berton, The Promised Land: settling the west, 1896-1914, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 206.
[45] Ibid., 207.
[46] Thomas et al, The Prairie West to 1905, 226.

cattle baron."[47] This halcyon image became easier to embrace when Oliver and others made connections between the ranchers and the Conservative party.[48] Historian Lewis G. Thomas explains that it was not the ranchers but the settlers who "appealed to a morality that was much more in step with the buoyant enthusiasm of nation building."[49] Oliver, then, was able to hide his political and perhaps personal distaste for ranchers behind the mystique which surrounded the yeoman farmer, that mythical creature who embodied man's essential goodness. This body of ideas about the dignity and goodness of the farmer was an extension of the views of agrarian life characteristic of the Jeffersonian period in American history during the late 18th and early 19th century. Oliver supported the idea of the settler and settler's rights, but he did so for purely political reasons. Oliver's animosity toward the ranchers underpinned the 1908 amendment and it gives the legislation and its consequences a pronounced quality of pointlessness.

Oliver assumed office laden with his political and intellectual baggage in 1905, a time when it was believed there would soon be little available homestead land left. The fear was that "prospective immigrants would settle elsewhere if new lands were not made available."[50] In 1905, it was believed there was little available homestead land remaining in the Canadian West because of the unparalleled success of the first stage of federal settlement policy between 1896 and 1905. This scarcity of land prompted Oliver to seek out new lands even while plotting to settle the drylands.

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[47] David Breen, The Canadian Prairie West and the Ranching Frontier 1874-1924 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 51-52, 168.
[48] Ibid., 58. Breen adds that this allegiance "remained an enduring characteristic of the region's political structure until well after the turn of the century."
[49] Thomas et al, The Prairie West to 1905, 226.
[50] W.A. Waiser, The New Northwest: the photographs of the Frank Crean expeditions, 1908-1909 (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishing, 1993), 1, 9-11, 47-50.

The more sensible of these extra-curricular efforts at finding more land came in 1907, when Oliver dispatched adventurer Frank Crean. Crean was to scout for additional agricultural land north of the North Saskatchewan River. While his efforts were successful, Crean remains remarkable for another reason. He was the last man in a long and distinguished line of agricultural explorers whose presence in Canadian history stretches back to Captain John Palliser and Henry Youle Hind in the mid-nineteenth century.

Not surprisingly, Oliver also had less sensible ideas. In 1907, he began taking back reserve land granted to Indians. Oliver bought or removed from Indian reserves thousands of acres of land making small reservations smaller and their people less inclined to pursue an agricultural existence. [51] These land surrenders were not insignificant. The Cowessess and Kahkewistahaw bands gave up 53,985 acres of land under the land surrender policy of Oliver, who was also the superintendent of Indian Affairs.[52] This surrender amounted to 337 quarter sections of land. Reserve lands, he felt, retarded settlement because Indians "make no practical use" of the land and thus it should be taken away and settled.[53] Oliver even flirted with the callous idea of settling the lands without the consent of the reserve population.[54]

Despite this effort to locate new lands and take back lands already committed to Indians, Oliver's mind always remained focused on the drylands, and the circumstances in which he found himself in 1908 were almost divine. Historian David Jones noted that in 1908, "[Oliver's] favored people, the teeming settlers, were already in the outer

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[51] Sarah Carter, Lost Harvests: prairie indian reserve farmers and government policy (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1990),237, 245.
[52] Ibid., 245
[53] Ibid., 245, 249.
[54] Ibid., 245.

courtyards of the citadel of the drylands."[55] Of those lands, some twenty-eight million acres were flat, treeless and empty, not counting the ranchers. Oliver had many justifications for settling the drylands. Now he just needed an excuse.

Settlers in Saskatchewan had long petitioned for the construction of a rail line to port at Hudson Bay. This rail link, they felt, would serve as a closer, more cost-effective method of commodity export. The rail link to Hudson Bay became one of the key demands of the agrarian protest movement on the prairies in the closing years of the first decade of the 20th century and it was one of the key points in the famed 1910 "Siege of Ottawa."[56] The fortuitous timing of this demand even allowed Oliver the chance to demonstrate his magnanimity. He graciously insisted that taxpayers not be compelled to pay for the construction of the line. The essential point, Oliver felt, was that the line "should not lay any additional burden upon the treasury of this country."[57] Oliver's aim was to finance the rail link with the money raised from the sale of the lands between Moose Jaw and Calgary. This proposal he claimed, would "ensure the early building of the railway to Hudson Bay."[58] It also ensured the demise of the dominance of the ranchers.

In 1908, Frank Oliver amended the Dominion Lands Act and thus opened to settlement the entire tract of land between Moose Jaw and Calgary south of North Battleford. This legislation enabled settlers, after paying a ten dollar fee, to file on 160 acres of land, the free homestead. After satisfying the settlement obligations which included residence on the land for six months in each of six years, settlers could then

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[55] Jones, Empire, 21.
[56] Paul Sharp, The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: a survey showing American parallels (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1997), 32, 126.
[57] Debates, 14 March 1907, 4690.
[58] Ibid., 23 June 1908, 11137.

"pre-empt" or have first-right-of-purchase on an adjoining or nearby quarter-section to be sold for $3.00 per acre. Settlers were also obliged to construct a house of not less than $300 assessed value. In one fell swoop, then, the "retardation" of Canada would be ended, all lands could be filled, and funds would be created which would be "a new source of revenue which will provide sufficient money to ensure the construction of a railway to Hudson Bay."[59] Oliver solved a lot of problems with the amendment. He created just as many.

Oliver was not unaware of the potential problems which settlers faced in farming south-west and west-central Saskatchewan, but he claimed his amendment took account of those dangers. The amendment, for example, expanded the usual size of homesteads from 160 acres to 320 acres. Oliver explained that "if a man can only farm one half of his land each year [the other half laying fallow, collecting moisture] then he must have twice as much land."[60] Just twelve years after Oliver made these statements, in 1920, Saskatchewan's Better Farming Commission pointed out that repeated crop failures proved beyond doubt that a half-section farm in the arid districts was a useless and hopeless proposition. Settlers in Nebraska had already discovered the pitfalls of half-section farms. Owing to homestead failure, the Kincaid Act of 1904 enlarged homesteads to 640 acres of land.[61]

Oliver justified his optimism in the strength of the 320-acre farm by pointing to the famed Dry Land Farming techniques. According to the experts "inflated like blimps with

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[59] Ibid., see also Martin, 'Dominion Lands', 162-164.
[60] Ibid., 23 June 1908, 11142.
[61] Martin, 'Dominion Lands', 162-164. The Kincaid Act would be followed by other legislation after 1910 which encouraged the development of stock-raising homesteads, in effect, turning much Nebraska land back to a cattle preserve.

their own self-importance," the science of farming would render dryness irrelevant.[62] Such faith was quite misguided. "Somewhere deep in the Universe" writes Historian David C. Jones, "the blaring of these blowhards of the settlement era still reverberate[s]."[63] Chief amongst these "false prophets" was Angus MacKay, the superintendent of the Dominion's first western experimental farm at Indian Head.

MacKay explained, reasonably enough, that the purpose of the dryland technique was "to store up moisture against a possible dry season."[64] Settlers were encouraged to plow deep and conduct mid-season surface tillage. This method, according to MacKay's contemporary W.R. Motherwell, would "put the necessary non-conducting soil mulch on the top to...prevent loss of soil moisture by evaporation."[65] If this approach was diligently followed, Motherwell explained, the growth of "at least two successive crops is secured even though drought should occur." Motherwell would later clarify this point. During the height of the dryland crisis in 1921, he callously maintained, whilst "in a snit," that agricultural success "is chiefly, if not entirely, due to straight good or bad farming."[66]

Both Motherwell and MacKay felt that the science of farming could overcome drought and the two men perpetuated this idea of infallibility. In doing so, they poisoned the minds of the staff of the Saskatchewan's Department of Agriculture. Saskatchewan's Deputy Agriculture Minister, A.F. Mantle, for example, could scarcely contain himself in 1912 when he extolled the virtues of summer-fallow: "the result is a guarantee for the

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[62] Jones, Empire, 134-135.
[63] Ibid., 135.
[64] Angus MacKay, "Preparing Land for Grain Crops in Saskatchewan" Pamphlet #3, Experimental Farm for Southern Saskatchewan, 1910, 2.
[65] W.R. Motherwell, "Dryland Farming in Saskatchewan" Excerpt of an Address Delivered at the Fifth Annual Dryfarming Congress, 5 October 1910, 2.
[66] As cited in Jones, Empire, 138.

next season against everything but hail and frost. What progress it reveals!"[67] It would not be until well into the crisis of the 1920s that the ideas of Motherwell and MacKay were to be "thrown into history's dustbin of discarded lies." In the years before the crisis of the 1920s grew to its full proportions, however, and during the years of the rose-colored optimism that befogged the minds of the men engaged in nation-building, both Motherwell and MacKay were received with reverence.[68]

That summer-fallow created more problems than it solved was explicitly recognized by both. Summer-fallow, MacKay noted, had two distinct disadvantages: it contributed to soil drift and it caused the "partial exhaustion" of the soil.[69] Motherwell too saw summer-fallow as a system which "restores nothing to the soil."[70] Both knew and understood that the science of farming sapped the soil of its nutrients but both also agreed that this deficiency could be overcome. MacKay felt comfortable enough with the technique that he practically dismissed any inherent problem when he said that when soil drifting is corrected, soil exhaustion "will disappear."[71] In 1908, the sentiment of men like MacKay and Motherwell was enough to dismiss as nattering Cassandras those who worried about farming in the drylands.

Even Saskatchewan's first Premier, T. Walter Scott, fell victim to a variant of the optimism infecting the minds of settlement-era nation builders. Scott believed that, even if science could not overcome the elements, "honest labor could overcome even poor soil

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[67] Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter SAB), GR-44, R-5-2, Papers of F.H. Auld, A.F. Mantle, "Progress in Western Agriculture", (no date) 1911.
[68] Motherwell also inadvertently solved the puzzle of whether it was the Canadian or Americans who invented the dryland farming technique when he stated that the method was "introduced into Canada." See Motherwell, "Dryland Farming," 1.
[69] MacKay, "Preparing Land," 2.
[70] Motherwell, "Dryland Farming," 2.
[71] MacKay, "Preparing Land" 2.

and weather conditions."[72] Scott's belief explained much about how the province reacted to the first total crop failure which would hit the drylands in 1914.

Backstopped, then, by either an unrealistic optimism or misplaced faith in science, anxious to end the political power of the ranchers and unable or unwilling to stop settlement, the Dominion Lands Act was amended and the drylands thrown open to settlement on September 1, 1908.[73] That Oliver may have been overstepping his bounds by single-handedly orchestrating the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act was not lost on other members of the House of Commons. Running as an undercurrent beneath the debates on the amendment was a secondary antagonism over the concentration of land-policy power in Oliver's Interior portfolio. Qu'Appelle Member of Parliament R.S. Lake called Oliver an "absentee landlord [with] practically despotic powers" who had more power than any constitutional monarch.[74] Future Interior Minister W.J. Roche agreed. Roche called it "dangerous" to vest in one portfolio power over immigration policy and blanket administration of public lands which included swamp lands, timber rights, grazing rights, pre-emption prices, and mineral control.[75]

Oliver, however, remained quiet during this energetic discussion and rarely spoke to the charges of despotic power though he gritted his teeth to make it through the final onslaught launched by excitable North York M.P. George Foster. Foster flat-out called Oliver a "despot" and argued that Oliver's power contained within it the seeds for "infinite deviltry." He concluded, rightly or wrongly, that Oliver was "the boss of all of

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[72] Gordon Barnhart, Peace, Progress, and Prosperity: a biography of Saskatchewan's first premier, T. Walter Scott (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2000), 24.
[73] See Martin, 'Dominion Lands' 164-165.
[74] Debates, 14 March 1907, 4699.
[75] Ibid., 4715.

us."[76] Flattering though Foster's assertion may have been to Oliver's ego, this frontal attack on his power did little to move the man who had long believed in "unrestricted settlement." He ended debate on the amendment by standing and declaring "we are not closing anything to settlement."[77] And so it was.

Fittingly, the drylands were open to settlement following a crop failure. The 1907 failure followed close on the heels of the legendary devastation visited upon the cattle ranchers in south-west Saskatchewan during the killing Winter of 1906/07 when as much as eighty percent of herds were lost to the bitter and ferocious cold.[78] The otherwise reasonable and sensible Interior Deputy W.W. Cory displayed an uncharacteristic streak of irrationalism when he claimed that the failure was "momentary" and that the seed aid distributed by the department that year would prove the exception not the rule. Like so many others after him, Cory succumbed to the temptations of optimism and claimed that the crop failure actually "demonstrated beyond doubt that if the expectations of one season are not realized, those of the next year may be safely relied upon."[79] This entirely unrealistic assessment would shortly be proved wrong.

Despite the ominous start to a plan which undid thirty years of land policy, the effects of the amendment were immediate. In some regions, like the Alsask district, "virtually every quarter or half section was taken up and homestead shacks sprouted like grain on the prairies."[80] Thousands of people converged on the region between Moose Jaw and Calgary to try their luck in the Last Great Land Rush of modern times. These

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[76] Ibid., 4727.
[77] Ibid., 23 June 1908, 11145.
[78] David Breen, The Canadian West and the Ranching Frontier, 1872-1924, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983) 145-148.
[79] Canada, Department of Interior, Annual Report, 1908, (Ottawa: C.H. Parlemee, 1909) xiv.
[80] Captured Memories: a history of Alsask and surrounding school district (Alsask: Alsask history book Committee, 1983) v.

were people who before had only been able to "look with longing eyes" at the opportunity passing them by in the soft green Eden, according to Chief Statistician Francis Hedley Auld.[81]

The Dominion Lands offices were not prepared for the massive onrush of humanity that accompanied the amendment. The Department of Interior had only one land office in the south at Moose Jaw, with which to handle the thousands of homestead applications which poured in during the second half of 1908. Moose Jaw was the termination point of the Soo Line. The harried and overworked James Rutherford claimed that 1908 was "the most successful ever experienced" for homestead applications and he added that the "greatest stampede for land" showed no signs of slowing.[82] Of the 21,154 homestead entries filed in Saskatchewan in 1908, Rutherford processed 8,710. By comparison, the next busiest land office at North Battleford processed just 3,385. The remainder were scattered throughout the province. In all of Alberta, only 13,771 homestead applications were filed in 1908, though the Medicine Hat land office was conspicuously busy. Land agent J. W. Martin noted that in the month of September alone, "more quarter sections were disposed of than in any month since the land throughout the west became available for settlement" which, in other words, meant since the middle third of the 19th century.[83]

American farmers made up the largest single group of settlers homesteading in the drylands.[84] It seemed that Americans, unlike Europeans, preferred the vast, empty stretches of open prairie.[85] During 1909, the first full year after the amendment, 41,568

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[81] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1908, 93.
[82] Canada, Sessional Papers, Department of Interior, Annual Report, 1908, vol.XLIV, No.10, "Report of the Dominion Lands Agent," 33.
[83] Ibid., 4.
[84] Randy Widdis, With Scarcely a Ripple: anglo-Canadian migration into the United States and western Canada, 1880-1920 (Montreal" McGill-Queens University Press, 1998), 294.
[85] Ibid., 295.

people filed a homestead claim in the pre-emption area.[86] Of this number, 13,566 were American mostly from the states which bordered or were near to the international boundary itself. They came from the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Nebraska. There were even six people from Alabama who made the trek to the drylands as did one lonely and adventurous puritan soul from Delaware.[87]

The high rate of American emigration was rooted, in part, in the life circumstances south of the border. Alongside the fact that lands in the American west had all been settled, it seems many Americans in the middle-western states existed in a state of apparently permanent tenant farming and were unable to own their own land.[88] But no matter their circumstance, Interior Deputy Minister W.W. Cory felt that Americans were a "highly desirable class of people" who "require no instruction."[89]

The stream of Americans into the drylands continued at a vigorous pace in those early years. Of the 39,000 settlers who filed a homestead claim in 1911, 10,978 were from America, though none came from Alabama or Delaware that year.[90] And of those 39,000, 20,484 were absorbed into Saskatchewan compared to 15,184 for Alberta.[91] Saskatchewan in fact was once the destination of choice. The young province absorbed the majority of the new arrivals in each year; 17,556 in 1912 and 14,504 in 1913, compared to Alberta's 12,942 and 12,208 in the same years respectively.[92] That Saskatchewan always attracted the largest number of settlers is attested to in railway

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[86] Canada, Sessional Papers, 25, vol. XLV, no. 16, 1911, xx.
[87] Ibid., xx. Delaware was the first state admitted to the Union. Its motto is "Liberty and Independence"; the state motto for Alabama is the still-defiant "We Dare Defend our Rights"
[88] Karel Bicha, The American Farmer and the Canadian West, 1896-1914 (Lawrence Kansas: Coronado Press, 1968), 88.
[89] Canada, Sessional Papers, 25, vol. XLV, no. 16, 1911, xxix.
[90] Ibid., 25, vol. XCLVII, no. 18, 1913, xx.
[91] Ibid., xxii.

[92] Ibid., 25, part 1, Vol. XLVIII, no 19, 1914, xxiv; see also 25, part 1, no 19, 1915, xxiv.

mileage: between 1905 and 1910, 13,852 miles of track were laid in Saskatchewan compared to 7,910 in Alberta for the same years.[93] Amidst this astonishing level of growth in such a short time, Deputy Cory had the pleasure to report in 1912 that all across the drylands, "Contentment, optimism and progress prevail."[94]

The face of Saskatchewan changed upon being swamped by these incoming thousands. Prior to the introduction of the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act in 1907, there were only 1,677 farms in south-west and west-central Saskatchewan and just 106,900 acres of land was under cultivation.[95] In 1908, the number of farms exploded to 5,294 with 516,577 acres under cultivation.[96] The year after that saw 5,860 farms and 503,172 acres under cultivation.[97] The success of the amendment was deceptively clear.

The rush of life onto the drylands created a not insignificant amount of revenue for the Department of Interior. $530,589.00 was generated by homestead and pre-emption fees in 1908, which helped push total revenues to $3,200,000, well above the department's previous record of $2,700,000 in 1906-07. "The net revenue," gushed Interior Deputy Cory, "is the largest in the history of the Department."[98]

Lost amidst the unbridled and almost unchecked optimism of those early years of settlement, however, was one fairly relevant point: crop failure struck again the year in which the Dominion Lands Act was amended. Settlers who had begun trickling into the south-west in 1908 posted yields of just nine bushels an acre or less. The problem was only slightly worse in south-east Alberta where the yield struggled to reach fifteen.

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[93] Ibid., 24-25, Vol. XLVI, no. 17, 1912, xxix.
[94] Ibid., 25, part 1, Vol. XLVIII, no. 19, 1914, xi.
[95] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1907, 116.
[96] Ibid., 1908, 76.
[97] Ibid., 1909, 78.
[98] Canada, Sessional Papers, 25, part 1, vol. XLVIII, No. 19, 1914, viv-x.

Saskatchewan's F.H. Auld resisted any temptation toward caution or worry: "Doubtless...there was not stored in the soil sufficient moisture to withstand the hot winds."[99] He added that "proper cultivation methods" would have no doubt increased yields.[100] In Alberta, of seventeen crop districts, only the Medicine Hat region in the south-east fell below fifteen bushels per acre.

The drylands demonstrated its Janus nature with the crop of 1909. As if to prove William Cory's estimate that "the next year can be safely relied upon," Saskatchewan's arid regions posted the highest yields in the province in 1909. At twenty-nine bushels per acre, the south-west and west-central areas outperformed Saskatchewan's eight other crop districts which averaged twenty-two bushels per acre of spring wheat.[101] The actual volume of crop produced, however, was well below other regions as the Swift Current district yielded 3,4000,000 bushels of wheat in a provincial total of 90,000,000 bushels spring wheat. Deputy Agriculture Minister A.F Mantle approved of the "splendid showing" of the dry regions when he noted that "when sufficient moisture is available...this land can grow crops unsurpassed."[102]

The glowing circumstance of 1909 was similar just a few miles across the border in south-east Alberta, where yields reached twenty-three bushels per acre spring wheat.[103] Echoing Mantle's and Auld's estimation of the wonders of summer fallow, Alberta Agriculture Minister George Harcourt, in a fit of optimism, suggested that since the

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[99] Ibid., 78.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1909, 75.
[102] Ibid., 73.
[103] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1909, 45.

principles of Dry Land Farming "are so sound and so applicable to all districts...a strong and persistent effort is being made to change the name."[104]

The rate of settlement into south-west Saskatchewan increased in direct proportion to the optimism and fleeting success of 1909. Of 19,139 homestead applications filed in Saskatchewan's nine Dominion Land's offices that year, 9,573 were filed at the Moose Jaw office.[105] So in two years almost 20,000 homestead entries had been recorded in the drylands. This continued rush of the "Mossback" or "Sodbuster" into the dry lands continued to upset and anger the region's dwindling but dogged cattle ranchers.[106] Deputy Minister Mantle noted in his annual report for 1909 that there were a high number of complaints being registered with the department from far-seeing ranchers who felt that "a long tried industry" was being forsaken and destroyed "for the sake of a precarious one."[107] 1910 proved the point.

From 1908 and for the next six years (excepting 1909), the south-west and west-central regions posted yields lower than the provincial average, yields which suggested only a nervous mediocrity precariously balanced between existence and failure. Even when the yields seemed to be respectable, the actual volume of grain produced remained well below the provincial average.[108] It was during the years after 1910 that the first exodus from the dry areas occurred though it is perhaps incorrect to call it an exodus because those who were leaving had not stayed long enough to establish themselves in

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[104] Ibid., 69.
[105] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1909, p 94
[106] Mossback and Sodbuster were (and perhaps still are) pejorative terms applied to the settler by cattle ranchers.
[107] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1909, 91.
[108] The wheat yield figures represent the average production of each crop district; the crop volume represent the actual amount of grain produced.

any meaningful way. Those who left did so, in part, because they appeared to know and quickly realize the nature of the region in which they were trying to farm.

Crop District Number Six, the west-central region, was hardest hit in the failure of 1910. The average yield was seven bushels per acre, while District Three in the south-west posted yields of just ten. That year the provincial spring wheat average was a respectable twenty bushels per acre.[109] What was even more noticeable were the actual production numbers. There was an almost inconceivable drop in the amount of actual grain produced in district 3 from 3,400,000 bushels in 1909 to 170,644 in 1910.[110] The provincial yield production totals topped 72,000,000 in 1910. It was like the drylands did not even exist.

South-east Alberta suffered a similar fate. Crop District Number Six in that province registered yields on spring wheat of just 7 bushels per acre.[111] And, as in the Saskatchewan case, there was a quick effort to denounce the poor showing as the result of bad farming. Minister George Harcourt believed the crop failure was caused by "a lack of intelligent methods"[112] Harcourt, in a comic twist on his efforts at removing the word "Dry" from "Dry Land Farming" techniques also resisted using the word "drought," opting instead for the much less judgmental "droughty." Alberta was actually compelled to send its publicity commissioner on a damage control tour that year. The excitable and enthusiastic Charles Hotchkiss arrived in Portal, North Dakota on a hot summer afternoon because of an apparent "returning exodus" of American settlers.[113] All who

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[109] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1910, 68.
[110] Ibid., 68.
[111] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1910, 42.
[112] Ibid., 42.
[113] see also Bicha The American Farmer, 96. Bicha notes that during the eighteen year period of his study, 1910 was the year when the American exodus out of the dry lands was highest. Of course this does not count the period after 1917.

listened to his street-corner bombast were informed that any rumors of drought and failure were just that, rumors, which were "exaggerated and untruthful." [114]

The excessive optimism and perception difficulties of the Departments of Agriculture in both Alberta and Saskatchewan were shared by Dominion Land agents. E.B.R. Pragnell was the agent at the newly opened land office in Swift Current which handled 5,568 applications for homesteads in 1910. Pragnell too was unable to guage correctly the nature and magnitude of the problem with which the south-west and west-central areas were faced. In words which would have made George "Droughty" Harcourt proud, Pragnell dismissed the 1910 failure as due to momentary "excessive dryness." He was unable to connect the crop failure of 1908 with that of 1910 and opted instead for optimism when he wrote that "the settlers in this district should, ere long, be in very comfortable circumstances." He also added the hopelessly obvious comment that "if conditions tend to favor the farmer this year, the crop should be abundant."[115] Moose Jaw land agent James Rutherford agreed with Pragnell's estimation of the nature of the problem though noted that "business transacted" in 1910 was quite light compared to that first harried year of the rush. Rutherford handled 5,285 homestead applications in 1910.[116]

In some ways, the years 1911-1913 provided the only real period of stability which Saskatchewan's dry region would experience until 1939. Both the yield per acre and total yield production numbers were remarkably static, which is to say remarkably mediocre.

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[114] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1910, 229-230. It is of more than passing interest to note that Saskatchewan did not maintain a publicity commissioner similar to Alberta. Interesting because it is one more way that the difference between the two provinces is revealed within the context of this crisis, alongside the major difference of how the two provinces differed in reaction to the same problem.
[115] Canada, Sessional Papers, vol. XLVI, no. 17, 1912, 51-53.
[116] Ibid., 23-25.

The dry region, for example, prospered in 1911 under the bounty of a sixteen bushel per acre crop, though it still remained the lowest producing region in the province, producing just ten million bushels of wheat in a ninety-seven million bushel year.[117] The period between 1911 and 1913 can be considered as an oasis of calm before a storm. An argument could be made based on yields alone that the settlement of the region was justified. But the actual physical direction of the settlers is the most reliable indicator of how successful farming in the area actually was during the early stages of settlement.

Starting in 1911, the year after the third partial crop failure in four years, the numbers of settlers declined dramatically, in some instances by as much as half. At no other land office did the numbers drop so dramatically. Moose Jaw land agent G.K. Smith noted that between 1909 and 1910 the number of settlers filing on land in south-west Saskatchewan dropped from 10,921 to 5,503, skidding to 4,087 in 1911. He explained this by saying that "land suitable for farming is fast becoming scarce."[118]

In 1908, cancellations at Moose Jaw were at an agreeable figure of roughly thirty-percent, a figure shared by most other land offices.[119] That figure, however, climbed to sixty percent in 1910 and lodged itself at eighty percent between 1911 and 1913, again a figure *not* shared by other land offices. Of 4,087 homestead applications at Moose Jaw in 1911, for example, 3,419 people registered cancellations. Smith failed to give the cancellation numbers for 1912 but 1913 saw just 2,000 homestead entries next to 1,749 cancellations, or a cancellation rate approaching ninety percent.[120]

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[117] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1911, 46.
[118] Canada, Sessional Papers, vol. XLVII, no. 18, 1913, 32.
[119] The percentage figures are based on the number of homestead applications being filed versus the number of cancellation being filed in each year. It is inexact, but the percentage provides a window into the vast numbers of people fleeing this region.
[120] Canada, Sessional Papers, vol. VL, no.19, 1915, 45-47.

Cancellations demonstrate one vital theme in dry land settlement: the number of settlers pouring into this region was almost always equal to the number of people leaving shortly thereafter. Smith's records seem to indicate that the number of cancellations reached their peak just after the third crop failure in four years and this spike in cancellations must be at the very least considered conspicuous especially when this pattern was shared by the other land offices in the south-west.

The Swift Current land office opened for business in 1910. The office did not include any cancellation rates until Frank Forster took control in 1913 when the rate hit almost eighty percent. Of the 2,039 applications filed that year, 1,468 people cancelled.[121] Forster noticed that despite the seeming bounty of the crop that year, an unusually high number of people left the region. He explained the exodus as the first "process of elimination" which saw "many undesirables, as well as many desirables...migrating again." He minimized the problem when he explained that the cancellations really represented nothing more than settlers "restlessly moving, as they always will" though he hinted at what was actually happening when he said the exodus represented the old Darwinian conception of "survival of the fittest" and he added he respected those who "pulled through."[122]

The situation was similar in the Maple Creek land office, which did not open until 1912. The 2,771 homestead applications received that year were counter-balanced by the 1,696 cancellations filed at the office, which is roughly a cancellation rate of eighty-percent.[123] By comparison, the land office at Humboldt in east-central Saskatchewan saw a cancellation rate of between twenty-five to thirty-five percent in 1910 and 1911. There

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[121] Ibid., 44-46.
[122] Ibid., 45.
[123] Ibid., 31.

were 1,762 entries in 1910 alongside just 481 cancellations, and in 1911, of 1,739 entries, just 656 people cancelled their homesteads.[124]

The early years after the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act were deceptive, deception of course being one of the characteristics of the dry region. For example, 1911-1913 seemed to offer the hope that some meager measure of consistency could be maintained. But when abnormally high cancellation rates and the crop failures of 1908 and 1910 are factored in and balanced against the broader period of time between 1908 and 1939 a different picture emerges. In this instance, what becomes apparent about the post-1908 period is the three short years of precarious stability under which pulsed strong and ominous undercurrents. Those undercurrents would surface in 1914.

The year 1914 was a return to the rule, not the exception. Deputy Agriculture Minister A.F. Mantle was forced to concede total crop failure "in those districts that have recently been settled."[125] In a year which Mantle characterized as "slow and backward," crops in the south-west and west-central regions averaged between absolute failure of two bushels per acre and the only slightly less worrying partial failure of ten bushels per acre. The other seven crop districts in the province averaged sixteen bushels per acre.[126] Of the seventy-four million bushels of wheat harvested that year, just seven million came from the dry region and only 857,000 from District Number Three, the area surrounding Swift Current-Maple Creek.[127] Mantle reported that "the land in the south-west district was said to be drier than it had been within the memory of the oldest settler." Crops were ploughed

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[124] Canada, Sessional Papers, vol. XLVI, no. 17, 1912, 18; Canada, Sessional Papers, vol. XLVII, no. 18, 1913, 16.
[125] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Reports, 1914, 106.
[126] Ibid., 113. This average was calculated using the yield returns of all crop districts except Districts three and six in the drylands.
[127] Ibid., 113.

under, there was a remarked absence of birds, and creeks in the district simply dried up.[128] In 1914 the province orchestrated a relief program, a development which would become a mainstay of policy for the dry regions until the end of the 1930s. But despite the first appearance of a near total crop failure, Chief Statistician F.H. Auld held firm to the practice of summer fallowing when he noted that 1914 was "a trying one for many new settlers whose land had not been properly brought under cultivation."[129]

In an open letter to settlers published in dryland newspapers that summer, Premier Walter Scott explained what the province would do to help drought-stricken settlers. Farmers were ensured lower transportation rates for getting to and from threshing crews on which they were expected to find work; additional road and bridge construction was planned on which settlers were expected to work; and lower feed rates for cattle were introduced.[130] Scott also took a predictable intellectual detour into that waning optimism surrounding "scientific" farming. The premier believed that "a gratifying feature" of the 1914 crop failure is that "good returns can be obtained from properly summer fallowed land."[131] He concluded this venture into unreasonableness with the curious observation that somehow, "our faith in the excellence of our soil...is only strengthened by the experience of this year."

Scott's seemingly absurd observations about the crop failure stemmed from his beliefs about agriculture. Scott commonly referred to agriculture as "the foundation of civilization" and he additionally argued that "without farmers the country would be useless" because agricultural commodities were "the real basis of all business and

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[128] Ibid., 111.
[129] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1914, 106, 108.
[130] "Premier Scott Comes to Aid of Farmers", *Kindersley Clarion*, 27 August, 1914, 1.
[131] Ibid., 1.

commerce."[132] Given these feelings and beliefs it is not surprising then that Scott would acknowledge neither the severity of the crisis nor its implications, such as the wisdom of settling and farming the drylands. For Scott, "the dignity of agriculture" could surmount any difficulty.[133] Views of this variety are the likely reason as well, why the crisis does not really register in the news-papers of the period

The idea that the fate of the province of Saskatchewan was intertwined with agriculture was an idea developed and ceaselessly perpetuated by the collective mind of the Scott government.[134] For Scott, the crop failure of 1914 was a threat to that intertwined fate. He clearly understood that land abandonment would be the logical implication of crop failure. And since land abandonment, in Scott's mind, was equated with the failure of the promise of Saskatchewan, he resisted answering those disturbing questions associated with the crop failure.. registers so little during this time period. Scott's views on agriculture were shared by his successors, most notably Premier Charles Dunning. His views would create similar intellectual roadblocks during the crisis of the 1920s.

The federal government also immediately realized what the crop failure of 1914 meant. In an effort which Scott would have most assuredly approved, the Borden administration instantly moved to prohibit the cancellation of any homestead applications until the following year after seeding.[135] The Dominion government also established relief depots at Swift Current, Maple Creek Medicine Hat, and Lethbridge which provided fodder, flour, and coal so that "there will be no hardship or suffering and no

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[132] Barnhart, Peace, Progress and Prosperity, 89.
[133] Ibid., 74.
[134] Ibid., 77.
[135] Conservative Party of Canada, "Relief for the Western Settler" (Ottawa: Federal Press Agency, 1914), 2.

sacrificing of stock and implements necessary for work on next years crop."[136] Like the province, the Dominion government shared in the cost of reducing ticket rates to transport the stricken settlers to threshing crews. These measures to keep the settler on the land were, according to the endearingly eager Conservative press agency, "*in keeping with the avowed policy of the government to protect and assist its new settlers.*"[137] The Dominion government also developed a quite novel way to assist its settlers, over and above removing their freedom to cancel homestead entries and putting them to work on road crews and bridge-building gangs. Dominion authorities pledged that all of the re-mounts required for the Royal North West Mounted Police would be purchased only from stock breeders in the drought-stricken area.[138]

Scott's unflagging enthusiasm and Borden's aid programs were designed to do one thing: prevent the settler from fleeing. The promotional pamphlet published by the Borden government explained that "this prompt and effective action by the government has successfully met a serious situation which threatened the depopulation of a large area in the west and has protected settlers in that area from financial ruin and great hardship."[139] Neither Scott nor Borden could afford to allow or even encourage abandonment which, at least in the early settlement years, was the natural consequence of drought and crop failure.

The crop disaster of 1914 was an opportune time to re-evaluate the nature of farming in the dry regions and that re-evaluation almost happened. The Ranching and Grazing Investigation Commission, or Pope Commission as it was known, was

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[136] Ibid., 2.
[137] Ibid., 1. Italics in the original.
[138] Ibid., 2. The RNWMP needed to purchase at least one thousand horses in 1914.
[139] Ibid., 2.

established in 1912 at the request of W.J. Roche, the Conservative member who replaced Frank Oliver as head of the Department of Interior after Oliver and the Liberals were defeated in the famed Reciprocity Election of 1911. The commission consisted of three men led by George Pope, after whom the commission was named. Their purpose was simple: they were to re-evaluate settlement and arrive at some conclusions regarding further agricultural development in the drylands, and they were to also find ways to improve the lot of the region's long suffering cattle industry.

The commission traveled throughout the drylands in late 1912 and held a dozen meetings at key locations such as Swift Current, Maple Creek, and Medicine Hat. Like the 1908 amendment, the 1913 report represented far more than might be suggested by looking at its physical contents. It recommended a near-complete reversal of land use policy for the drylands.

As of 1912, only five years had elapsed since Oliver had allowed the first settlers to homestead in the drylands. Roche and the members of the Pope Commission understood the folly of settlement in the dryland area but their hands were tied because the amendment had been so successful. The region had been settled, municipal institutions established, and crazed rail-line construction had begun. By establishing the Pope Commission, the Department of Interior was flirting perilously close to asking the unappetizing question: how can settlement be undone? The province would wrestle with that same question in the 1920s, but it was a question with no simple answer.

The commission's final report did not mince words: Chairman George Pope wrote that "there are considerable areas of land...which are altogether unfit for settlement" in

the dry region.[140] Pope added that the public meetings produced the "emphatic and unanimous" opinion that an estimated four million acres of land should be withdrawn from settlement in south-west and west-central Saskatchewan because it was "a matter of common knowledge" that these lands could not successfully be farmed over the long term.[141] It was not simply the lack of moisture which made agriculture in this region difficult, it was that wide swaths of land had soil "altogether unfit for homesteading" and these regions should be closed off to prevent "disastrous consequences."[142]

The Commission also attempted to steer land use policy back to what it had been in the years before Frank Oliver. In an effort to atone for Oliver's sin, the commission endorsed recommendations which nurtured and developed the cattle industry which was still reeling from the sudden and all-consuming rush of settlers onto the drylands. The commission recommended enlarged grazing leases where available land made that possible; extended grazing leases on lands currently used for such purposes; and removal of the two-year lease-cancellation clause.[143] The recommendations of the commission closely resembled the land use policy of the 1880s. Time and conditions, however, ensured that the primary recommendation would be ignored: the four-million-acre tract of land in south-west and west-central Saskatchewan would remain open to settlement. It was precisely from this region that settlers would flee by their thousands in the 1920s.

Settlers played a not insignificant role in keeping the region open. They saw the disturbing implications in the recommendation to close a portion of the drylands to

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[140] "Report of the Ranching and Grazing Investigation Commission," (Ottawa: Department of Interior, 1913), 1-3.
[141] Ibid., 4. see page 125 of this thesis for a copy of the map which shows the area the commission sought to restrict. It is also important to note that many cattle ranchers attended these meetings and it is likely from this group that the "emphatic and unanimous" opinion developed about the quality of the land.
[142] Ibid., 6.
[143] Martin, 'Dominion Lands', 179-180.

settlement. Such a move threatened to isolate and then strangle the budding agricultural industry in this area. Like the legislators of era, settlers clung to their faith in the land but for different reasons. The penalty of admitting a problem, for example, seemed high. After all, changing countries, occupations, and lifestyles should occur only once in a single lifetime. And so settlers petitioned the Department of Interior and the province to reject the land-closure option of the Pope Commission.[144] The provinces, buoyed by the spirit of optimism and supported by a third year of consistent agricultural mediocrity in the dry lands, supported the effort to keep the region open. And so it was. Had both levels of government and the settlers themselves been aware that the crop of 1914 in the drylands would be a total failure there might have been less effort to keep this region open to settlement. As it was, in February of 1914 the federal government passed an Order-in-Council which approved the recommendations of the commission as it related to the cattle industry, but not the recommendation which argued for the closure of the dry lands. The Order-in-Council was passed just six months before the first total crop failure hit the drylands.

[144] Breen, The Canadian West, 188-191.

Chapter Two:

"If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth. And if the tree fall toward the south or toward the north, in the place where it falleth there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap."

- **Ecclesiastes, 11:3-4**

The Saskatchewan Government's abysmal handling of the dryland crisis between 1917 and 1923 was rooted in a number of different elements. The same narrow, overly-optimistic intellectual climate that produced the 1908 Dominion Lands Act also produced the province's dismal response to the crisis. As well, unreasonable faith in scientific agriculture morphed into orthodoxy, and it would prove difficult for the administrators in Saskatchewan's Department of Agriculture to renounce that attractive faith because it seemed to hold the answers, like so many other ideas before and since. Additionally, Premier Walter Scott had long made it clear that that the fates of the province of Saskatchewan and the agricultural industry were crossed. Scott's ideas about agriculture permeated the provincial government. The basic belief was that agriculture would make Saskatchewan the power-house province of the Dominion. As such, any attempt to untangle Saskatchewan's fate from agriculture would obviously be met with resistance. Premier Charles Dunning shared these views. He was an Ontario-born farmer; the business manager for Saskatchewan's Co-operative Elevator Company and (later) Premier during the worst of the crisis. He ensured that the province's fate would not be

altered. Dunning and his Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton both understood that the province could not concede that there was a crisis in the drylands because the penalty of such an admission was too high.

As the dry regions descended from mediocrity into failure and from there into bankruptcy and abandonment, there was a brief detour through the lush green valleys of 1915-16. In a strange and somehow fitting inversion, the dry regions in these two years out-produced every other crop district in the province. Chief Statistician F. H. Auld was ecstatic: "nature produced with marvelous prodigality and her greatest generosity was shown towards the farmers in districts where the crop in 1914 was practically a failure."[145] Auld even went so far as to produce a list of the twenty-six highest producing farmers in the province, all from the dry regions, in a show-demonstration of the vitality of the region's soil. Peter Hackenlieb from Prussia produced fifty bushels per acre of spring wheat. J.P. Firnquist of the now non-existent Stone district somehow managed to squeeze 3,800 bushels of wheat out of seventy-six acres of land, or 116 bushels per acre.[146] The drylands averaged thirty-one bushels per acre while the province averaged twenty-five. The total production for 1916 was an astonishing 173,723,775 bushels of wheat, almost double what was produced in the area during the years between 1911 and 1913. These amazing yields were exactly what Premiers Scott and Dunning had in mind when they envisioned the future of Saskatchewan: year after year, wallowing in agricultural crapulence.

1920, however, arrived trailing a succession of four crop failures in its wake. Yields plummeted to twelve bushels per acre in 1917; seed relief re-appeared in 1918 as

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[145] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1916, 10.
[146] Ibid., 120.

the yields bottomed out to catastrophic proportions of four; the Municipalities Relief Act was passed in 1919 which placed the burden for providing not only seed, but also flour, fodder and coal squarely upon the shoulders of the individual Rural Municipalities. This act was passed in a year when crop production in the drylands hovered at between three and six bushels per acre. The legislation would also push RMs to the brink of insolvency and destitution when the crisis hit its peak in 1921 and would lead, in one instance, to open municipal revolt.[147]

1920 and the three years preceding it starkly demonstrated the dangers associated with dryland farming. It may be noted that the entire province suffered from low yields during this period, but it was only in the dry region where the problem was severe enough to prompt the calling of a provincial Royal Commission of Inquiry or what was known in 1920 as the Better Farming Conference. The conference was called in direct response to the escalating crisis in dryland agriculture whose futility was captured in the weather reports of Alberta's Department of Agriculture. The south-east area of that province was undergoing crop failure on a similar scale during the period after 1917. The following report was filed by staff of the weather bureau but it reads like an S.O.S. from a sinking ship: "crops very poor; farmers going north; many fields are being ploughed under; wheat is a failure."[148]

The Better Farming Conference was set up in Swift Current during July 1920. Farmers were relieved to see that something might be done to improve matters. Tompkins area farmer J.H. Veitch favored holding such a conference and at the same time he also

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[147] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Reports, 1918, 111; 1919, 104.
[148] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1918, 128. In 1919, the Alberta government established aid offices at Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Youngstown to provide settlers with the "necessities of life." See Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1919, 10

understood the strangeness of the request: "such a conference would have been considered mad" in 1915-16.[149] But it was not such a bad idea in 1920. By that time many settlers finally understood the nature of the drylands and its dual nature, a nature which often concealed the fact that the dysfunction of the drylands was characteristic and not fleeting.

That the recent four-year failure was the rule not the exception and that it *could not* have been prevented by Dry Land Farming techniques was an idea expressed by the Vidora chapter of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association. The secretary treasurer wrote to Saskatchewan Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton and explained that it had become "painfully evident" that even the best summer fallow "falls pitifully short of solving the problem [of crop failure].[150]" Lewis Harvey added that most Vidora area farmers were "groping, as it were, in the dark for the proper methods." Harvey warned that "conditions are fast approaching acute and in a short time distress will be general."[151] And he was right. Notwithstanding efforts to prevent such occurrences, the Vidora region suffered horribly in the early and mid-1920s from abandonment, land seizures, tax sales and bankruptcy. The remains of this suffering can still be seen today: Consul is the largest community south of the Maple Creek and east of Eastend and it has just under 300 residents.

The Better Farming Commission set up its operations in Swift Current amidst the suffocating heat of a drought year in 1920. The first action undertaken was a road tour through what the sub-committee believed was the hardest hit area in order to gain a

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[149] Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter SAB), R-261, 23-1-3, "Papers of the Deputy Minister", J.H. Veitch to Charles Dunning, 18 February, 1920.
[150] Ibid., L.J. Harvey to Charles Hamilton, 19 July 1920, 1.
[151] Ibid.

ground-level appreciation for what had occurred. Starting in the fairly productive district of Cadillac directly south of Swift Current, the committee noted that the area was generally productive with many crops yielding twenty to twenty-five bushels per acre.[152] This seeming bounty in the Cadillac district illustrates an intriguing point: the borders of the worst afflicted areas were fairly sharply drawn. Highway 21, for example, separates the RMs of Hillsborough/Newcombe from the more easterly RMs of Elma, Mantario, and Royal Canadian. These last three municipalities lost 990 farmers (excluding wives and children) during the 1920s while Hillsborough and Newcombe lost none. Likewise with the Cabri district: the RM of Enterprise registered an increase in the number of farmers during the 1920s while the RMs directly to the east lost hundreds.

The commission realized this curious nature of drybelt borders during its tour. As they headed east from Cadillac, commission members noted "the appearance of the soil changed"; the dirt was lighter and much sandier than the heavier soils to the west.[153] The Committee also found that the crops were "not so good," there was already some abandoned land and, previewing what would become one of the recommendations of the Royal Commission, some abandoned land was "already going back to grass."[154]

The committee advanced through a moonscape of devastation. The entire area of Vidora-Consul-Senate region and north, up toward Maple Creek, was written off as "very bad." To prove the point, forty-six farmers from Senate along with their families

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[152] Ibid., "Report of the Sub-Committee of Saskatchewan's Better Farming Commission", 4 October 1920, 1.
[153] Ibid., 1.
[154] Ibid., 1.

(approximating some 120 people) were evacuated from that region and moved en masse to Tisdale in east-central Saskatchewan in 1923.[155]

From Maple Creek north to what would prove to be the appropriately named RM of Big Stick, conditions were much the same. The committee noted the higher prevalence of soil drift between Maple Creek and Golden Prairie and also the ubiquitous presence of misery in whose grip most settlers struggled. According to the report from the road tour, the settlers were "simply hanging on in the hope that something will turn up to better their conditions."[156] At Big Stick, the committee's brief tour of the drylands ended. But this arbitrary end to the tour was a mistake because the areas devastated by crop failure, and also the area which would suffer worst from abandonment, stretched north from Big Stick all the way up to Kindersley-Alsask, an area which would lose the majority of its settlers between 1923 and 1927.

The conclusions of the sub-committee merely re-stated the obvious. "Rainfall is not sufficient" the report concluded; the half-section farmer, despite what Frank Oliver argued in the 1908 Dominion Lands Act, "is very handicapped [and] cannot hope to make a success"; and cattle or mixed farming is "absolutely essential" for any enterprise to be a success.[157] These conclusions were long known and considered common knowledge, even the point about mixed farming. J.H Veitch had pointed out to Premier Charles Dunning in early 1920 that "the cry 'go into cattle' or 'go into mixed farming'....placed many a man in a more embarrassing position than he might have

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[155] SAB, Ag. 2-7, Papers of Department of Agriculture, "Correspondence re: Movement of settlers, 1922-1925", CNR Freight Agent E.A. Field to F.H. Auld, 25 July, 1923.
[156] SAB, "Report of the Sub-Committee", 2.
[157] Ibid., 5.

otherwise suffered."[158] This is to say that many men, already stretched financially thin from four years of drought, went bankrupt trying to diversify.

The information from the sub-committee's road tour formed the basic working outline of the formal and much more intensive Better Farming Conference which had set up its base in Swift Current. The results of both the sub-committee and the recommendations of the Commission in Swift Current would later be labeled the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Farming Conditions. The commission agreed at the start that one recommendation above all others must be pursued: "to find ways and means [of evacuating settlers] to more suitable land."[159] Two-and-a-half more years would pass before the province would relent to the pressure of this resolution.

The Royal Commission's report dealt a blow to a number of assumptions which had guided the effort to settle the drylands. Chair George Spence, for example, was forced to concede that the summer-fallow method was not as safe and efficient as had been previously imagined. Spence and the commission argued that summer-fallow was "forced on us by necessity" before anyone realized that "it removes from the soil, ingredients necessary to produce a crop." [160] Spence, on behalf of the Commission, declared, "we are looking for a new system" for farming in the drylands and thus recommended the establishment of an experimental farm at Swift Current.[161] Previous to

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[158] SAB, R-261, 23-1-3, Vietch to Dunning 1-2.
[159] Ibid., "Copy of Resolutions of the Better Farming Conference", 167.
[160] Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Farming Conditions, 1920, 10-11. This statement by Spence was not true. Soil exhaustion had been long known as one of the disadvantages to summer fallow. Motherwell and MacKay both knew of it at least as far back as 1910, likely much earlier.
[161] Ibid., 10-11. That the province also had to be frog-marched into financing some form of experimental research is suggested when Premier Dunning explained to the Legislative Assembly in 1919 that "it does not appear that the provincial government should undertake the establishment of experimental farms in competition with the federal government." See Journals and Sessional Papers, Legislative Assembly of the Province of Saskatchewan, Session 1919-1920, (Regina: J.W.Reid, 1920), 18 December 1919, 55.

1920, the only experimental farm in the drylands was located at Lethbridge which was established in 1908.

In addition to a formal recognition that summer fallow could not "guarantee results" every year as A.F. Mantle argued it could in 1912, there was also an assessment of the climate. Meteorologist Sir Frederic Stupart explained that the south-west was, simply, prone to cycles of drought "although variations do occur" such as they did in 1915 and 1916. But he concluded that he "could not imagine any portion of the world where there was less chance of [climatic] change" than in the south west."[162] Drought in the south-west, then, was the rule and not the exception.

The core recommendation of the committee was the evacuation of settlers. The idea of evacuation was the first resolution passed by the conference in 1920 and its presence as an idea in the final report is unmistakable. Commission Chair George Spence concluded that "to abandon such lands would be the first step towards finding a way to use them."[163] And while he would not admit that settling the region was a mistake when he noted that "I am not prepared to take that ground at the present time," he did recommend that the Dominion Lands Act be suitably amended to allow homesteaders to leave the region and file on a second homestead elsewhere.[164]

Conspicuously absent from the Better Farming Commission's report was any mention of how actually to farm better. Arriving at a determination as to what constituted the best methods for agricultural existence in the drylands seemed at times to be a bottomless question with no real answer short of the simple one: rain. And since that could not be legislated, the problem of proper farming was actually left dangling at the

[162] Report of the Royal Commission, 16.
[163] Ibid., 44.
[164] Ibid., 11.

conference. At any rate, the absence of thought on dryland farming was not a mistake. The absence was merely an indication that by 1920, the first cracks had begun to appear in the ludicrous notion that summer-fallow was a guarantee against everything except hail and frost. In 1920, neither the province nor the experts knew where or how to proceed.

The uncertainty over agricultural practices was even felt by those who had no stake in the success or failure of settlement in the drylands. University of Saskatchewan agronomist John Bracken published a book in 1921 in which he found himself having to explain the horribly obvious point that "[summer-fallow's] most intelligent practice does not make crops grow in the absence of rain."[165] He further noted that even those on the cutting edge of agriculture did not have any idea of how to successfully farm in the drylands. Bracken threw up his hands on the dangers of summer fallow when he said "if the fallow dissipates organic matter and nitrogen-- and it does to a serious degree-- then we shall have to dissipate organic matter and nitrogen until we find a better way because we must have water in the soil and the fallow is the best way to get it there."[166]

Bracken's matter-of-fact statements about the possibilities and limitations of summer-fallow were substantiated by his colleagues in the United States whose experience in the drylands had taught the same hard lessons. United States Department of Agriculture agronomist E.C. Chilcott took aim at men like Motherwell, Mantle, and MacKay and their unreasonable faith in the possibilities of dryland farming when he noted that the claims of what summer-fallow could actually achieve were "undoubtedly responsible for more false reasoning about dryland agriculture than any other thing."[167]

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[165] John Bracken, Dryland Farming in Western Canada, (Winnipeg: Grain Growers Publications, 1921), 2. Bracken would later become the premier of Manitoba.
[166] Bracken, Dryland Farming, 174.
[167] Ibid., 301

Both Chilcott and Bracken offered the painful observation that summer fallow is fine, but only if it rains regularly

The lack of knowledge about proper farming was not limited to the experts. Settlers still had no clear idea of the best methods and practices that should be employed. Prelate Secretary Treasurer J.J. Keelor implored the province to do something to educate settlers because "the message [was] not getting through."[168] Keelor observed in 1921 that settlers' knowledge of proper agricultural techniques remained limited. In fact, their knowledge had not progressed much beyond the common practice of the halcyon years of 1915/16 of simply throwing seed into the ground and hoping something might come of it. "I am afraid" Keelor told Auld, "that some of the farmers have not gotten away from that idea."[169] Keelor reasonably thought that the province ought to be able to do something to remedy this lack of knowledge, "to spread good information." He also fully understood the implications of inaction: "A number of our farmers," Keeler wrote, "left last spring [for the United States] and I believe this fall or next spring will find quite a number more pulling out."[170]

Keelor emphasized to Auld the threat which faced the RM: "this particular part of Saskatchewan" Keelor explained, "has been too well developed and there has been too much money put into the district to have it go back [to prairie] without at least trying to do what we can to help out."[171] But Keelor's request for educational forums was denied by F.H. Auld, by now Saskatchewan Deputy Minister of Agriculture. Auld said meetings "will [only] be considered" because he was "simply not sure at the present moment just

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[168] SAB, R-261, F23-1-1, Keelor to Department of Agriculture, 23 May, 1921.
[169] Ibid.,

[170] Ibid., Keelor to Auld, 22 July, 1921.
[171] Ibid.

how definitely any person can speak to the farmers in your district" on proper farming methods."[172] Auld also took the time to correct Keelor's assertion that the crop failure crisis might improve if it would only rain when he said, that "sentiment" was true "everywhere."[173]

Auld may have been correct in his basic argument that the province did not know what to do or say regarding farming. But, at the same general time, Alberta's UFA government was doing as much as it could to get its representatives out into the drought-stricken areas. James Murray was the Department of Agriculture's representative in the Medicine Hat region. In just six months, between July and December, he conducted or attended thirty-five meetings and published two circulars distributed to area farmers all of which dealt with improving summer fallow and growing fodder crops, which apparently reduced the danger of soil exhaustion.[174] Murray felt that it was desirable to "get first hand knowledge of [farmer's] conditions and their problems."

The Saskatchewan government, by contrast, went one step further in its desire to wish the problem away. The Better Farming Train was cancelled in 1923. This train had been operating since 1914 and its creation was a direct response to the crop failure in the drylands that year. The train stopped at various communities explaining the latest agricultural practices and seed advancements.[175] Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton noted that "they [the trains] were expensive to equip and operate." In 1920, the cost of the train was $6,817.73 which included fifty-eight stops throughout the province attended by

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[172] Ibid., Auld to Keelor, May 27, 1921
[173] Ibid.
[174] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1922, "Report of Mr. James Murray", 18.
[175] "Agricultural Trains Not To Run This Year", *Regina Morning Leader,* 17 May 1923, 3.

some 35,000 people;[176] in 1922 that cost had escalated to $12,876.59.[177] Hamilton insisted that "this is, we believe, one of things we can get along without."[178] Hamilton's belief was misplaced.

The results of not having educational resources can be seen at the level of individual Rural Municipalities who were compelled to try their novice hand at solving the problems associated with dryland agriculture. The RM of Big Stick by Golden Prairie, for example, demanded the province "enact such drastic legislation as will compel all weed growers to keep their weeds on their own land."[179] It seemed some settlers had been cultivating their weeds into rows which were then carried thither by the wind spreading the weed infestation into neighboring fields. The proper cultivation technique seems obvious today; but in Big Stick, in 1922, it was not. This experience demonstrates a lack of knowledge which might have been alleviated by educational forums.

The RM of Maple Creek threw up its hands on the problem of soil drifting. Mr. A. Bernard, a settler, complained to the local council about soil drifting and demanded something be done about it. But council, completely without a clue, lamely fell back on the idea that "every man has the right to plow his lands as he sees fit." Furthermore, an irritated council tersely informed Bernard that "up to present we do not know of any way to prevent soil drifting and if you do we would be pleased to hear it."[180]

In desperation, the RM of Clinworth embarked on an enforced grasshopper killing campaign. Clinworth paid for the campaign to salvage at least some of the 1921 crop

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[176] Saskatchewan, Journals and Sessional Papers, Legislative Assembly of the Province of Saskatchewan, Session 1919-1920, (Regina: J.W. Reid, 1920), 18 December, 1919, 55.
[177] Saskatchewan, Journals, 1921-1922, (Regina: J.W. Reid, 1922), 24 January, 1922, 69.
[178] "Agricultural Trains Not To Run This Year", 3.
[179] RM of Big Stick Archives, (Golden Prairie), "Minutes of RM Meetings, 1920-1984", 5 August 1922.
[180] RM of Maple Creek Archives, (Maple Creek), "Minutes of Council Meetings, 1921-1972", 25 February, 1923.

from the one-two punch of hoppers and drought. Clinworth overrode the rights-of-man sentiment of the RM of Maple Creek and compelled all settlers to participate. Recovering the costs for the campaign was simple; as was the practice with relief aid, council registered liens against the lands of the settlers.[181]

The failure of the province to educate and the inability of the RMs and settlers to come to terms on some level with the nature of dryland farming led to talk of irrigation. Clinworth council took the step of writing to the Department of Interior asking for an investigation into the possibility of irrigating the entire tract of land from Sceptre west to the border.[182] Council argued that recent years "have demonstrated that it is with difficulty that farming operations can be successfully prosecuted" in the drylands and that irrigation remained the only way to "bring water to the land."[183]

Technically speaking though, there was another way. With the Better Farming Train to be cancelled, the Department of Agriculture resistant to the idea of educational tours on how to farm better, and the toll from crop failure mounting, Prelate Scretary Treasurer J.J. Keelor took the further step of asking the province to see about attracting ace rainmaker Charles Hatfield "regardless of what people think."[184] Keelor was not alone in his desperation. It seems other communities, risking no mild derision, enlisted the help of the famed American rainmaker. He seemed to have actually worked success in the Medicine Hat region. Indeed, when he arrived in that city in 1922, he was "accompanied by a light drizzle."[185] The logician Auld, however, would have none of it.

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[181] RM of Clinworth Archives, (Sceptre), "Minutes of RM Meetings, 1912-1981", 3 June, 1922.
[182] Ibid., 4 February, 1922
[183] Ibid.
[184] SAB, R-261, F23-1-1, Keelor to Premier Martin, 27 July 1921.
[185] David C. Jones, Empire of Dust: settling and abandoning the prairie drybelt (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987), 130.

Auld went straight to the American Department of Agriculture's weather bureau in Washington D.C. and asked for its opinion on Hatfield. The results were somewhat predictable. "The most elementary consideration of physics, chemistry and simple calculations" reasoned bureau chief C.F. Martin, "[are] sufficient to convince scientists that these schemes are wholly impracticable." Furthermore, "no reputable scientist acquainted with the laws and phenomenon of evaporation and condensation [can believe in the possibility of rainmaking]."[186] The appearance of Hatfield in historical records was an expression of the desperation felt by settlers.

Hatfield's claims to generate rain were not exceptional. His ideas traveled in the same warm and pleasing currents as the "rain-follows-the-plough" idea, an absurd and exotic intellectual curiosity developed in 19th century America. As the trans-Mississippi region was settled after the Civil War, the slow and steady settlement of Missouri was accompanied by an increase in rainfall. This happenstance morphed into a folk-myth in the mid-nineteenth century and in a few short years it became a matter of science.[187] "Rain-follows-the-plough" became accepted dogma at the University of Nebraska where Natural Sciences Professor Samuel Aughey taught the idea, which was rooted mostly in hope and wishful thinking. According to Aughey, "not by any magic or enchantment, not by incantations or offerings, but, instead, in the sweat of his face toiling with his hands, man can persuade the heavens to yield their treasures of dew and rain upon the land."[188] Silly American curiosities, perhaps. But in Canada, such ideas became an accepted part of the Dominion Government's efforts to settle the west.

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[186] SAB-R, R-261, F23-1-1, Martin to Auld, April 1921.
[187] Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: the American west as symbol and myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 211.
[188] Ibid., 211.

When construction was being done on the CPR mainline through the drylands in the latter third of the 19th century, concern was raised about the legendary dryness of the area. This worry was overcome by the strange belief that "with settlement rains will come."[189] According to experts, both settlement and the steel of the track will "disrupt" electrical currents "thereby" causing rain.[190] The rains, of course, did not come; the idea that settlement and steel could change climate was rooted in the feelings and emotions of optimism and nothing else. The idea was not, however, the most absurd to come out of the settlement years. In fact, "rain-follows-the-plough" seems positively sane and intellectually well-balanced when placed against gravity-generated electricity.

In late 1922, the last of the old fashioned snake-oil salesmen almost found a home on the prairies. "Edward Pim, Inventor" claimed to have found a cost-free way to generate electricity by using gravity, and he tried to interest Premier Dunning in his discovery. It was, according to Pim's own estimation, "one of the greatest discoveries of modern times!"[191] Gravity-made electricity was hailed as the energy which would enable farmers to wash clothes, do chores, cook meals and, generally speaking, make all of life "really worth while." Pim, who also dabbled in "experimental research" involving Ether, was similar to Aughey and all the others who believed that settlement would somehow bring rain to the drylands. These men played on the hope that the problem with which settlers were faced might be solved somehow and in some way. It was hope of a desperate quality, like the type which struck Clinworth farmer D.C. Kirk.

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[189] Regina *Leader*,4 May 1886, 1; Jones, Empire, 24. See also Jones, Empire, 21, for the Department of Interior pamphlet which reflected the belief that rain followed the plow; the pamphlet reads, in part: "Magicians wand never produced more striking effect than did the placing of a pair of steel rails over the stretch of the prairies southwest from Saskatoon..."

[190] Jones, Empire, 21, 24.

[191] SAB, M6, Y-105-1(a), Papers of Charles Dunning, "Canadian Railway Branch-lines: General, September 1922 to January 1926" Pim to Dunning 32784, 1922, 1. The letter is riddled with exclamation points.

Kirk explained to Premier Dunning in the summer of 1921 that he "awoke and found himself sitting up in bed" one evening because he had "seen a vision of what will in time take place" in the drylands.[192] Kirk had dreamed of a colossal construction project to develop lakes and canals for irrigation in order that the drought and soil problems might be solved absolutely. In Kirk's fevered estimation such a project would cost roughly $15,000,000.00 ("the best money ever spent") and it would ensure "splendid crops and millions of bushels" which he quite reasonably suggested "would be a wonderful asset in paying off our national debt." The project, as Kirk dreamed it that hot sweaty evening, would be "the greatest enterprise in the history of the dominion."[193] Kirk, along with "hundreds of others," was on the verge of losing his farm at Cliftonville, a community located just past the eastern edge of the Great Sand Hills.

A year after Kirk had penned his heat-induced visions to the Premier, the Dominion Lands Act was once again amended to accommodate an apparent problem. It seemed that many settlers had been going insane before "proving up" their homesteads. So, section twenty of the act was quietly altered to ensure that only the cultivation requirements of settlement duties (ie. keeping a certain amount of land under cultivation) need be satisfied "in the event of any person...becoming insane or mentally incapable."[194]

Against this backdrop of absurdity, life for the settlers in the drylands got worse and worse. RM of Mantario Secretary Treasurer J. Evans Sargeant explained to Deputy Minister Auld in 1921 that "this municipality is faced with the most complete crop failure

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[192] SAB, R-261, F23-1-1, Kirk to Dunning, 13 October, 1921.
[193] Ibid., Thanks to Bill Waiser for pointing out that Kirk may not have been delusional but may have very well seen in his dream a vision of the South Saskatchewan Dam project of the 1960s.
[194] SAB, M6, Y-O-4, "Drought Areas," 2133.

that has been known since it was settled."[195] There was no rain, no crop, and no hay and Sargeant added that "unless something can be done, some 1,500 people...are faced with the prospect of starvation this winter."[196] While there is no record of starvation, or of relief provided in response to this specific crisis, the RM of Mantario lost 325 farmers and their families between 1920 and 1927.

While the threat of starvation may or may not have been accurate, there is some level of corroboration for this dire situation from the local Member of the Legislative Assembly W.H. Harvey. Wheat yields in 1921, Harvey confirmed, peaked at the abysmal figure of zero to ten bushels per acre, which was a charitable way of saying the failure was absolute in some areas and partial in others. He added that "there are practically no oats."[197] Again to ward off the apparent threat of starvation, a concerned Harvey recommended settlers be put to work on road gangs to ameliorate the effects of the disaster.[198] He explained that settlers "are becoming discouraged with conditions and many of them are simply broke."[199]

The condition in which the settlers found themselves led to the establishment of relief funds. Thirty miles east of Mantario in Kindersley, for example, the local Grain Growers Association and the local chapter of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (I.O.D.E.) both set up deposit locations for food and clothing and, as winter approached, locations for coal and mittens. The I.O.D.E. asked "those more favorably situated" to contribute because many settlers in the areas have had "no crops, or only a little, for some

[195] SAB, R-261, 23-1-1, Sargeant to Auld, 14 July 1921.
[196] Ibid.,
[197] Ibid., Harvey to Auld, 11 August 1921.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid.

years now."[200] In one instance, the RM of Clinworth appealed to the Regina Red Cross for aid. It seems a settler in the Clinworth district asked council for "boots and shoes for her children to go to school." But the RM at that time was on an enforced austerity campaign and so was compelled to ask the Red Cross in Regina for help.[201]

The province remained resistant to any action which would remove settlers from this discouraging existence. Auld explained to dryland farmer Pete Harder a full year after the Better Farming Commission recommended evacuation and second homesteads that the chance for obtaining a second homestead was "a rather remote possibility."[202] Instead, Auld urged the Clinworth district settler to "review very carefully the chances of success [where you are]" and additionally advised Harder that winter rye has been grown to some advantage in his region and that perhaps he should try that.[203]

The province also resisted helping settlers who had become involved with Colonization Companies. A group of thirty German settlers from Leader enlisted the help of Western Colonizers Limited in 1926 so they might get help abandoning the drylands. W.C.L. spokesman J.P. Murphy informed Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton that "these people" have not had any crop for ten years and "had no resources to sustain them through the coming year."[204] The group had apparently marshaled together its meager resources to purchase a block of land "owned by a syndicate" in the Davidson district south of Saskatoon. The province, however, refused Murphy's request because it feared

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[200] see, "Relief for Dried out Farmers," Kindersley *Clarion,* August 28, 3; "I.O.D.E. Form Committee to Help Needy", Kindersley *Clarion,* September, 1924

[201] RM of Clinworth Minutes, 3 February 1923.

[202] SAB, R-261, 23-1-1, Auld to Harder, 9 August 1921.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Ibid., Murphy to Hamilton, 10 July 1926.

the "very grave difficulties" which might arise out this sort of commercial movement. So, the Germans bought their way out.

The threat of "very grave difficulties" was the same reason the province refused assistance to settlers represented by Theodore Herzu. Herzu, a representative of the CPR-owned Canada Colonization Association, asked the province to assist with the removal of an unspecified number of "Baptist families." Herzu urged the province to consider his aid request in view of the fact that the C.C.A. was not making any special deals for services rendered to stricken settlers. But again, Hamilton refused. He insisted that the drylands "will support a population though necessarily less thickly settled than where there is abundant rainfall."[205] Reflecting the province's concern with the de-population, Hamilton noted that his refusal was rooted in the concern he had for those "[who] are anxious to maintain their municipal institutions."[206]

Indentured servitude was another option stricken settlers could choose as a way to get out of the drylands. Six German-speaking Russian families representing some forty-five people entered into a crop share agreement in 1923 with Calgary-based Western Stock Ranches. President H. Honens asked the province to assist the settlers with the cost of moving their goods. Honens explained that the settlers were to be provided with food, clothing and shelter. In return, the refugees were to work the company lands at Cluny, Alberta paying off the debt with the proceeds from their crop.[207]

Honen used the word "destitute" to describe the Konschuh clan but even that seemed an understatement. The hardened and leathery sixty-one-year-old Phillip Konschuh along with his sixty-year-old wife and nineteen-year-old son had all fled

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[205] Ibid., Hamilton to Herzu.
[206] Ibid.
[207] SAB, Ag. 2-7, Honens to the Department of Agriculture, 26 March 1923.

Russia just ahead of the "pitchfork and machine gun reforms of the Bolsheviks."[208] After seven years of farming in the Maple Creek region, however, Konschuh had amassed $1,500 in liens against his land and as of 1922 had not produced more than three bushels per acre in the six years preceding his departure. The year he moved he managed to grow nothing.[209] While the province denied aid to settlers using Colonization Companies it approved and paid for the removal of the forty-six members of the Konschuh clan. For those who had neither access nor money to enlist land or colonization companies, the local priest seemed to serve the role as intermediary. The Reverend H.J. Schmidt of the Maple Creek district wrote the province on behalf of forty-four families who could no longer afford to farm in the drylands and asked the province to help in getting them out. No response was recorded.[210]

The above snapshots of mass removal and evacuation, alongside the individual farmers who abandoned their land, demonstrate a crucial point. Auld and the department could not claim ignorance. They clearly knew what was occurring in the drylands. This is not the question. But what created and aggravated the problem, the element which precipitated the government's failure to address the matter, was the attitude with which the department approached the crisis. That attitude underpinned the government's later action (or inaction). Using impeccable logic, for example, Auld explained to Swift Current area settler Thomas Lannan that merchants do not come begging for assistance when they fail "and I am unable to see why there should be any distinction raised

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[208] The quote on the Bolsheviks can be found in J.F.C. Wright, Saskatchewan: the history of a province (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1955), 212. Wright also offers the not entirely un-truthful observation that "some militant leaders in the Saskatchewan agrarian movement mouth[ed] Marxist phrases fed them by dedicated members of the Communist Party of Canada, most of whom would see Bolshevik Russia only in books and illustrated propaganda pamphlets."

[209] Ibid., "Application for Free Shipment of Settler's Stock and Effects from Points in Dry Area" see page 126 for a copy of his application to be evacuated.

[210] SAB, R- 261, F23-1-1, Schmidt to the Provincial Government, 16 July 1921.

between various classes in the community."[211] Although Auld admitted that the federal government "probably [has] a moral obligation" to help he stated that the province did not. In a somewhat condescending fashion, Auld instructed Lannan to go and work on a road-gang or threshing-crew. Furthermore, Auld suggested that if the crop failure was severe enough, Lannan might want to put both farm and family on hold to go in search of work in other areas of the province "for a year or two."[212]

The province did not begin any plan to execute the recommendations of the Royal Commission until an American farmer belatedly seemed to capture the attention of the province in 1922, the sixth year of continuous crop failure in the drylands. Anton Huelskamp, his wife Nettie, and their two daughters Katherine and Polly, lived in the starvation-threatened RM of Mantario. In the summer of 1921, the Huelskamp's were obliged to feed upon "porcupine stew," stew which was served once to a John Deere collection agent and on which he apparently gagged.[213]

Huelskamp penned a four-page letter of distress to Premier Charles Dunning outlining his predicament and that of his neighbors. "We have been six years without a crop," he wrote, "and near as long without rain." He asked the philosophical query, "is it fair or is it right" that the province should not aid its settlers in relocating to better lands given the circumstances.[214] That is the question which underpins this entire story of the dryland disaster. Huelskamp noted "hundreds" of settlers had already fled the region by 1922, and those with no money left were seen simply "walking out." According to his estimation, loan companies owned two-thirds of the homesteads and pre-emptions in the

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[211] Ibid., Auld to Thomas Lannan, 22 July, 1921.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Captured Memories: a history of Alsask and surrounding school district (Alsask: Alsask History Book Committee, 1983), 304-305.
[214] SAB, M-13, 14, f1, Huelskamp to Dunning, 8 July , 1922.

district. The four-quarter farm he had built up had been advertised for sale for some time in both Canadian and American newspapers but would not sell. Huelskamp stated the simple and obvious truth: "I could rent any number of good safe farms if I could get my stock and machinery out of here."[215] But he was unable to do that, and that was the problem.

Premier Dunning's blithe response to Huelskamp was characteristic of so much of what occurred during the dryland crisis. Dunning was "pleased to be able to state" that the conditions Huelskamp described affected "only a small area."[216] Dunning pointed out that the province was already providing aid to needy farmers, a statement which was not, strictly speaking, true. RMs borrowed money for relief from the banks; the RMs took land as security, purchased the relief and gave it to the settler; the province only assumed a direct role when the debts went into default.

Dunning answered Huelskamp's philosophical query of the rightness and fairness of the province's actions by saying that it was not the province's problem: "we have not been able to see our way clear to assume a responsibility which, properly speaking, belongs to the federal government in connection with opening up unsuitable lands for settlement."[217] Dunning, however, agreed to send out an investigator from the province's field crops division to establish the veracity of Huelskamp's claims. Apart from the breezy road tour of the sub-committee of the Better Farming Commission, the late summer of 1922 was the first time the province undertook a ground level investigation of any district in the drylands. It was also the first time the province had investigated the west-central area of the drybelt.

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[215] Ibid., 2-4.
[216] Ibid., Dunning to Huelskamp, 14 July 1922.
[217] Ibid.

The speedy and efficient J.M Smith arrived on the scene later that summer. He spent three days with Huelskamp, toured the RM, asked questions, probed, and tried to determine the extent of the devastation. His report was essentially a recapitulation of Huelskamp's letter to the premier. Smith agreed Huelskamp was in trouble: "his land is a tough proposition."[218] The RM, Smith noted, was overrun with Russian thistle and the average wheat yield in the past six years was between five and eight bushels per acre, though in some strange way Smith noted "[this district] probably gets more rain than other RMs" in the area. The land itself was excessively sandy, with too many rocks and too much alkali.[219] "Community effort," however Smith defined that, "[was] not very apparent." He finished by saying the Municipality, overall, "is a poor one." As for hope, that precious and mysterious element which underpinned the migrations of most people into the Last Best West, there was none left in the Huelskamp household, and Smith duly noted that, "[Anton's] wife, by the way, is the more emphatic of the two on this point."[220]

During the course of his fact-finding mission, Smith was cornered by a number of farmers in the district who asked him an awkward question. It seemed that it was not just Huelskamp but many others in the region who had heard Alberta was evacuating its settlers out of the drylands. Huelskamp's neighbors wanted to know what Saskatchewan was doing in this regard. The very question betrayed the fact that settlers were not aware that evacuation and second homesteads were the essential recommendations of the 1920 Better Farming Conference. All that Smith could tell them was that he "knew [of] no

[218] Ibid., Memo to Premier Dunning, 28 August 1922.
[219] Ibid., 2-4.
[220] Ibid., 3.

such assistance" and characteristically added "the dominion government had control of such matters."[221] Smith wrapped up his investigation shortly after.

Time passed and Huelskamp heard nothing more from the province. On a chill, late October day, he borrowed money from a neighbor, packed what he could into a horse-drawn cart and abandoned Masonville, leaving behind most of the machinery, the land, the house and six years labor.[222] Huelskamp later explained to Dunning in 1923 that "there was no feed to keep the stock through the winter" so they were compelled to leave because arrangements had at last been made in Brock where he would rent land located about sixty miles east of where they had homesteaded.[223] He asked the province to reimburse him for the move in the hope that he could be pay back his neighbor. But he also wrote for a more important reason: he had heard that many of his old neighbors had "secur[ed] transportation out" at provincial expense.

In the six months between the departure of Smith the investigator and Huleskamp's departure for Brock, the province had finally signed on to an existing removal plan developed by the Alberta government in 1922. Other farmers who had left Alsask had also requested to be reimbursed. But Auld refused. If Huelskamp was given aid, reasoned Auld, then everyone would be entitled. Auld felt "it was better not to establish a

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[221] Ibid., 3. The comment that it was a federal responsibility was not isolated to Smith but was apparently government policy. MLA George Spence (former head of the Royal Commission) asked Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton in late 1921, a year and a half after the completion of the Better Farming Conference, what Hamilton's government was doing to implement the recommendations of the B.F.C. In what would become a typical reply, Hamilton explained that most of the recommendations of the commission were a federal responsibility, such as grazing lands, second homesteads and the withdrawal of certain lands from settlement etc. This technically-correct narrow reasoning excused the province from almost anything. Hamilton did not mention anything about evacuating settlers, also a recommendation of the commission. See Journals, First Session of the Fifth Legislative Assembly of the Province of Saskatchewan, Session 1921-1922, (Regina: J.W. Reid, 1922), 15 December 1921, 24.

[222] Masonville was a postal sub-division which served a dozen families in the Alsask district. Anton had named it in honor of his wife's maiden name: Mason.

[223] SAB, M6, Y-0-4, "Drought Areas" Huelskamp to Dunning, 22 April, 1923. 2121-2122.

precedent of this kind."[224] This mass rejection of aid helps explain, in part, how it came to be that the Department of Agriculture could claim that the abandonment was minor. According to its own statistics, just 187 people received evacuation aid in 1923.[225] The RM of Mantario alone lost 222 farmers in 1923 on its way to losing 315 between 1921 and 1926. Conservatively estimated (husband, wife, child), this figure represents some 900 people.

Huelskamp received his letter of refusal in late spring 1923. Upon reading the contents of the letter, he turned the paper over and scrawled on the reverse side a brief message pregnant with meaning and promptly mailed it back to the provincial Department of Agriculture: "this letter might be marked as, 'One of the principal reasons why so many of our settlers are going south.'"[226] The man who seemed to have finally moved the province to accept the responsibilities recommended by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Farming Conditions was himself denied aid.

Developing a removal plan was not an easy task, particularly for a government which quailed and backed away from anything that even resembled responsibility. This recalcitrance was complicated by the other pressing question of what to do with the evacuated settlers. Where do they go? It was one thing to evacuate people, still another to provide or orchestrate some means by which life could be sustained afterward. The province remained locked in the grip of assumption and beliefs which spilled over into the plans for evacuation and second homesteads.

Alongside the idea that depopulation interfered with the fate of Saskatchewan as an agricultural powerhouse, the second largest difficulty with which the provincial

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[224] Ibid., Auld to Dunning, 28 April, 1923, 2123.
[225] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1923, 13.
[226] SAB, M6, Y-O-4, Huelskamp to Dunning, 13 May 13, 1923, 2125.

administration struggled was that of responsibility: solving the crisis was not their problem. The Department of Interior explained to Saskatchewan's Department of Agriculture that in order to effect the evacuation, Saskatchewan would necessarily be responsible for the detail of the plan. This included investigating and adjudicating claims for either a simple evacuation or a request for evacuation and a second homestead. These responsibilities went along with the more mundane aspects of the plan which included partial costs, organization, and staff. But an internal Department of Agriculture memo demonstrates precisely how far away the province was from accepting these propositions.

The memo indicates that the province had no staff, no investigative capacities, and "should not be required to incur the expense of providing for such a staff."[227] The memo indicates that such an initiative placed on the Saskatchewan government "the onus for rectifying mistakes for which the province had no responsibility."[228] Burned-out and bankrupt settlers were "brought here by the federal government" and any provincial involvement in righting that wrong "seems as unreasonable as it is unwarranted."[229] Clearly, the province was not overly disposed to participate in any plan for evacuating the settlers. But, for as much as it resisted satisfying the portion of its responsibilities contained in the Royal Commission, Saskatchewan was eventually compelled due to sheer weight of pressure to at least make an attempt at solving what in 1923 was a problem entering its seventh year. The worst of the Dirty Thirties, by comparison, lasted between eight and nine years.

The first step was to evacuate dryland settlers, a seemingly simple enough task but one which proved difficult to a certain degree. Fortunately, the province was not required

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[227] SAB, M-13, 14, f1, Internal Memo, Department of Agriculture, 10 November, 1922.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid.

to exert any considerable effort in developing the removal plan. The Alberta government had already laid the groundwork in early 1922 when it developed and organized a plan for settler removal.[230]Essentially, the participating province, the Department of Interior, and either the CNR or CPR would each pay a third of the costs associated with transporting the effects of the settlers out of the dry areas to a maximum of two freight cars per family. The families would place all their belongings into these cars including cattle and machinery. As the highly abstract CPR freight agent G.H. Smith put it, settlers would be evacuated by a plan "similar to that under which feed oats were moved" in 1922.[231]

A first level of difficulty developed, however, when it became apparent that the rail companies would contribute their third only if the settlers did not change rail service. Neither the CNR nor the CPR would participate in the plan if it turned out that they would be required to move a settler to an area in which the other company was operating. Auld requested that "some arrangement" might be developed where by the settlers would "not be penalized for changing railway allegiances."[232] But he received a quick and terse reply in a letter whose only words were "we do not reduce our rates on settler's effects moving them from a point on the CP line to a point on the CN line."[233]Auld had also asked about free transportation for settlers and was rebuffed here too when A.E. Hatley replied that "no consideration has been given to transportation of settlers at reduced rates."[234] Curiously, a year later in 1924, the Alberta government negotiated the free

[230] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1924, 20-21.
[231] SAB, Ag., 2-7, G.H. Smith to Auld, 6 January, 1923.
[232] Ibid., Auld to A.E. Hatley, 9 January, 1923.
[233] Ibid., Smith to Auld, 13 January, 1923.
[234] Ibid., Hatley to Auld, 23 January, 1923.

removal of not just the settler's belongings but the settlers themselves. But it was a deal which became null and void when a train crossed into Saskatchewan.[235]

The plan for the allowing drought-stricken settlers to file on a second homestead was also not simple. Adopting the role of fiscal libertine, Deputy Minister William Cory encouraged settlers to declare bankruptcy because he did not understand "what can possibly be gained by paying part of the removal expenses of the settlers and give them fresh grants of land if they are making their fresh start under a load of debt."[236] And so Cory euphemistically urged the province to encourage its settlers to "wind up their affairs." But the province saw unsavory implications in this approach. Rightly enough, the Saskatchewan government feared that many farmers who had gone bankrupt but not necessarily from farming the drylands proper, would use their hardship as a justification for applying for a second homestead, and Auld did not like this scenario. The "class of people" who would use bankruptcy to apply for a second homestead were in Auld's words, "of no particular value as settlers."[237]

There was also the attendant fear that the use of bankruptcy courts to "wipe the slate clean" would result in "an exodus of people from large areas" which, Auld argued, would be "not a little embarrassing."[238] Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton agreed when he said that "a whole lot" of settlers could apply for a second homestead using the bankruptcy claim and therefore the whole of the south lands could be emptied.

For its part, and much to the consternation of the provincial administration, the Department of Interior took the opposite view and went one step further when it also

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[235] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1924, 21.
[236] SAB, M-13, 14, f1, Cory to Dunning, 26 January, 1923.
[237] Ibid., Internal Memo, Auld to Dunning, 31 January, 1923.
[238] Ibid.

supported the relaxation of settlement duties and the reduction of the pre-emption fees for the second homestead.[239] But Agriculture Minister Charles Hamilton would have none of it: "I am of the opinion that it is not desirable that settlement duties should be made too easy." He informed the Department of Interior that the province would not encourage bankruptcy, it would not support a relaxation of settlement duties and it would not agree to lower the pre-emption fee and all for the same reason: the province feared a massive out-migration.[240]

By 1923, three full years after the recommendations of the Royal Commission, the province and the Department of Interior finally had in place the rules governing all elements of the drybelt evacuation. According to the province, 127 second homesteads were approved and issued in 1923 though that number may have been too many for the province's liking because the rules governing second homesteads were tightened up a year later.[241]

In 1924, Interior Minister Charles Stewart strictly defined the evacuation area as the region south of township 31 (just north of Alsask) and extending in a south-east line from that point toward the American border and including the present day Grasslands National Park.[242] The Interior Department also restricted second homesteads to those who

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[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid., Hamilton to Cory, 29 January, 1923.
[241] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture Annual Report 1923, 13-14.
[242] SAB, M-13, 14, Stewart to Dunning, 29 April, 1924. This boundary is obviously larger than the region under focus in this thesis. While second homesteads were granted to people in the outer regions of the drylands (a handful of settlers from communities like Vanscoy, Delisle, Rosetown, Trossachs etc. were given that second chance) most of the second homesteads were granted to farmers from the south-west and west-central region, though the records are incomplete. The file for the evacuation of settlers (SAB, Ag. 2-7, "Correspondence re: movement of settlers, 1922-1925") includes dozens of second homestead/ evacuation approvals from the Eyre-Alsask district. Since most of the approvals are from that one area and almost all are from 1923, one could conclude that the problem was in fact limited to the Alsask district and that the problem ended in 1923.

had lost a patented or "proved up" homestead.[243] The province certainly took advantage of the new stricter regulations. Of 138 applications for a second homestead in 1924, just thirty were approved by the province.[244] A similar number of settlers applied for the same program in Alberta and almost all were accepted.[245]

Charles Stewart was wholly supportive of the second homestead plan because he recognized both its utility and its importance. "The granting of a fresh homestead entry" he argued, "is the only thing that will keep these farmers in Canada."[246] And echoing his deputy's sentiments, Stewart once again tried to interest the province in lighter homestead requirements because "it strikes me that it would be good business sense" to lower the pre-emption fee or reduce interest rates on those fees.[247] Premier Dunning this time did not respond to Stewart's suggestions. Instead Deputy Auld responded a month later with the almost heinous observation that those who have lost their lands "are the least competent of our settlers" who "are not entitled to further assistance."[248] While he tempered these comments with the observation that many settlers are bankrupt due to "circumstances beyond their control," Auld resisted supporting the granting of second homesteads.

Perhaps part of the province's reluctance to pursue evacuation as an option can be found in crop yields. In 1922, there was a return to the deceptive mediocrity of the 1911-1913 period; deceptive because in the three years after 1923, yields in the drylands struggled to break past ten bushels per acre. The average yields for the drylands in the

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[243] Ibid.
[244] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1924, 12.
[245] Alberta, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1924, 20-21.
[246] SAB, M-13, 14, Stewart to Dunning, 29 April, 1924.
[247] Ibid., 2.
[248] Ibid., Auld to Stewart, 31 May, 1924.

mid-1920s are similar to the worst of the years between 1917 and 1922; five bushels per acre in 1924, nine in 1925 and between eight and twelve in 1926.[249]

The abandonment did not register in official public government documents of the time. According to the province, just 109 people were granted second homesteads in 1924 out of 207 who applied, and just 34 people were given evacuation assistance out of the drylands to other areas; the dry lands lost an estimated 2,000 people that year.[250] Auld never referred to the larger exodus and he minimized the smaller one when he noted that "it would have been remarkable if some of those who took up land had not decided that their choice was unsatisfactory."[251] In the following year, 1925, Auld blamed the settlers for the problems they were in when he said that lands were homesteaded "without due consideration of the quality."[252] Furthermore, Auld denied the existence of an area prone to drought and crop failure when he said that "such lands" occur in every province and in Saskatchewan "are not confined to the...south west."[253] From start to finish, from 1917-1927, Auld and the province avoided either practical or moral responsibility and downplayed the problem even as it mushroomed to greater and greater proportions. The Dirty Thirties, however, would brutally and unceremoniously disabuse the province of its ideas about the nature of the drylands and the quality of the people who farmed it.

The province feared depopulation and refused to countenance any suggestion that evacuation would solve the dryland crisis. While arguably a fine and sound idea, the cash-value of that sentiment resulted in a striking disregard for the existence of the settlers in the drylands; all the more striking when one considers that Alberta had, by

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[249] Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Reports, 1925, 238; 1926, 250; 1927, 259-260.
[250] Ibid., Annual Report, 1925, 13.
[251] Ibid., 12.
[252] Ibid., 1926, 13.
[253] Ibid., 13.

1924, long since committed to removing its settlers from the drylands. But then again, Alberta and Saskatchewan handled the crisis differently. Unlike Alberta, the fate of Saskatchewan was tied exclusively to wheat production. The belief that wheat farming was the only formula for success in Saskatchewan was a belief that hindered the response of the province to the crisis. Vidora-district farmer David Stonehouse was one of those settlers who suffered in the crisis. Stonehouse spoke deep truth when he explained to Auld that "it is not possible to make things what they ought to be unless one sees clearly what they are."[254]

[254] SAB, R-261, F23-1-1, Stonehouse to Auld, 27 March, 1922.

Chapter Three:

"The whole estate is not worth powder and shot"

- **Rural Municipality of Clinworth Councilor James Wardell, March, 3 1923, on the merits of seizing one of the hundreds of parcels of land against which relief liens had been registered by the municipality in exchange for aid.**

The experiences of the settlers in the dryland crisis were replicated at the municipal level. Rural Municipalities went through the same trajectory of hope, growing despair, financial restriction, and bankruptcy. As the crisis destroyed thousands of settlers, the drought also threatened to destroy the municipalities which Saskatchewan Premier Walter Scott had cheerfully and hopefully constructed in the years following 1908. Scott had followed up on his election promise of 1908 to establish "territorial units" to be comprised of nine townships (1,298 quarter sections) in rural Saskatchewan.[255] The tremendous growth of the province was reflected in the number of Rural Municipalities: by 1914, 295 RMs were established and functioning as local administrative and political units.[256] These local political units became responsible for executing Scott's vision for a rural, wheat-growing Eden. The Municipalities were responsible for a number of mundane yet vitally important elements in the development of rural Saskatchewan: local

[255] John Archer, Saskatchewan: a history, (Western Producer Books: 1980),153.
[256] Ibid., 153.

road and bridge construction, local telephone service, financing their own existence based on tax collections from settlers, and "granting aid or relief to a needy person."[257]

The editors of Saskatchewan's first guide to municipal bylaws assured the local administrators and councilors that "the man who gives his time and energy to the work of improving the government and institutions of his home municipality is engaged in one of the noblest employments open to subjects of a free nation."[258] This noble suggestion was supported by that profound and thoughtful 19th century French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville. He felt that "[municipal government] is the only association so well rooted in nature that wherever men assemble it forms itself."[259] De Tocqueville added that "man creates Kingdoms and Republics but townships [municipal government] seem to spring directly from the Hand of God."[260] No doubt the men of the RMs stopped and reflected upon those ennobling words as the dryland crisis coiled itself around the necks of the young RMs and threatened to strangle the life out of south-west and west-central Saskatchewan.

Most Rural Municipalities approached the crisis optimistically and never assumed that the crisis would grow to such staggering proportions. While the responsibility for providing aid remained optional, most RMs sallied forth into the crisis confident that the demand for aid would not be too overwhelming. On December 5, 1917, the province introduced the *Seed Grains Act* which empowered RMs to pass by-laws enabling them to secure loans from financial institutions to secure seed for next year's crop. This act

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[257] Bylaws for Rural Municipalities in the Province of Saskatchewan, (Saskatoon: Western Municipal News, 1910), 23, 76, 96-97.
[258] Ibid., 4.
[259] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America [translated by George Lawrence] (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1968), 62.
[260] Ibid., 62.

marked the resumption of aid relief for the drylands begun in 1914, or perhaps begun in 1908 when the Department of Interior was compelled to provide seed relief because no other institution or entity existed to provide it.

That the RMs were about to embark on a difficult course of action was not lost on the Department of Municipal Affairs. Deputy Minister J.N. Bayne noted that "under normal conditions, councils are wary of indulging in seed grain distribution owing to the difficulties so often experienced in securing repayment."[261] Bayne girded the RMs for what was to come when he said that "while we have seen sunshine and shadow [those RMs] will be stronger and self-sufficient whose fate it was to struggle."[262]

The confidence of Bayne was noticeably absent just three years later in 1921. Having seen the matter go from bad to worse and from there into abysmal, he noted that the drought "has adversely affected the financial standing" of many municipalities and this fate was "especially true of the municipalities...in the south west."[263] Bayne noted that banks in 1920 began limiting credit. There was also little, and in some instances no money for schools or telephone service. The *interest alone* that RMs paid on relief loans in 1920 was $270,546;[264] at the end of 1921, that figure mushroomed to $382,167.[265] These enormous sums were partly the result of replacing the *Seed Grain Act* in 1918 with the *Municipal Relief Act* which expanded the original 1917 bill and enabled RMs to purchase not only seed, but also fodder, flour, and coal. Section 21 of the beefed-up act placed the responsibility for collection of those loans on the shoulders of the RMs. So, alongside a province which refused to countenance the idea that a crisis existed, the

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[261] Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report, 1918, 8.
[262] Ibid., 8
[263] Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report, 1921, 5.
[264] Ibid., 6.
[265] Ibid., 1922, 5.

antagonism of debt collection was also added to the burden. The responsibility of alleviating the dryland crisis was almost fully placed on the backs of the political unit least fit to handle it.

Under the *Municipal Relief Act*, councils were empowered to pass by-laws to borrow money from lending institutions. Settlers would receive the relief purchased with this money by means of a promissory note "due on demand." As security, statutory liens were placed against the lands owned by the borrower of the relief.[266] Tenant farmers were required to put up some other form of collateral. As for repayment, the example of the RM of White Valley stands for all: "council shall in each year levy on all the assessable property...such sum as shall be required to meet the interest on the money borrowed" until settlers were able to pay back the principal.[267] The mill rate in some RMs went from a low of four to a high of seven during the crisis, to cover the cost of interest payments.

The RMs, however, faced the crisis in the beginning with a certain sense of optimism. RM of Clinworth Councilor Thomas Armstrong believed that the 1919 relief debt could "with every prospect, if the crops are normal this year, be entirely paid."[268] It turned out that the RM of Clinworth was unable to pay off its 1918 relief debt until 1925.[269] In early 1919, Clinworth was carrying relief debts in excess of $23,000.[270] By 1920, when the relief debt totaled $30,000 council passed another by-law which approved

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[266] RM of Clinworth Archives, (Sceptre Saskatchewan) "Minutes of RM Meetings, 1912-1981" (hereafter Clinworth Minutes) December 1921; see also RM of White Valley Archives, "Minute Book for RM of White Valley #49 from March 1916-December 1921" (hereafter White Valley Minutes #1) 5 January, 1920, 178.
[267] White Valley Minutes #1, 5 January 1920, 178.
[268] Clinworth Minutes, 1 February 1919.
[269] Ibid., 2 February 1925.
[270] Ibid., 5 April, 1919. The exact figure is $23,601.60. Clinworth aid had mushroomed from $8,949.85 in 1918 to very nearly twice that figure of $14,6512.75 in 1919. See Clinworth Minutes, 5 April 1921.

a request for an additional $15,000 for "needy farmers."[271] Admirable Clinworth had assumed a relief-debt load of at least $45,000 in just twenty-four months.

For Clinworth and for every other dryland RM, relief debt quickly spiraled out of control. This slide from guarded optimism into insolvency prompted Clinworth to tighten up its rules governing relief distribution. W. L. Lawton moved a motion in 1920 which limited relief to "extreme cases" and settlers would receive it "only after being interviewed and questioned before council."[272] At a special aid meeting in January 1922, for example, Clinworth approved aid for just twenty-five settlers.[273] Two months later, lending institutions stopped the flow of money into the RM. Clinworth was refused a $29,000 operating loan despite "repeated protests, interviews, telegrams and phone calls."[274]

The experiences of Clinworth were shared by most other dryland RMs. In early 1922, the RM of White Valley was carrying a relief debt of $50,866 which was made up in part by a $27,500 operating loan which had been secured because "in the opinion of council, taxes [owed] cannot be collected this year."[275] The relief debt was similar next door in the troubled RM of Reno. Working under a debt of $46,298, council borrowed an additional $8,380.45 for flour and fodder in 1923.[276] This frantic borrowing continued apace in 1924 with $7,435.33 in flour coal and fodder aid but abated somewhat in 1925 when a still disturbing $6,029 was required for assistance.[277] The records for 1926/27 are

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[271] Ibid., 6 March 1920.
[272] Ibid., 6 March 1920.
[273] Ibid., 14 January 1922.
[274] Ibid., 18 March 1922.
[275] White Valley Minutes #1 5 March 1921, p 264.
[276] RM of Reno Archives (the trailer behind the RM office, Consul, Saskatchewan) "Transfer Ledger, 1918-1923" see relief notes under Tab 'R'.
[277] Ibid., "Transfer Ledger, 1924-1932", Relief notes under Tab 'R'.

missing. The RM of Big Stick registered seed grain liens against 152 parcels of land in 1920 alone.[278]

In most instances, providing relief proved to be overwhelming right from the start. The RM of White Valley formulated its first relief loan request for 1920 at its regular meeting in January and at the same time approved aid for just six people totaling $256.90.[279] One month later, ninety-four families applied for aid totaling $16,490.75 in seed and fodder.[280] And as January made its slow and bitter way into February, council approved another seventy-nine applications for coal, flour, and fodder totaling $14,265.25.[281] At that same meeting, thirty-three settlers were provided with $7,992.50 in seed.[282] Thus in just two months, the RM of White Valley assumed a relief debt of $38,747. The enormity of the crisis was reflected in the amount of municipal aid distributed across the province during 1920. In this year, $492,000 worth of seed grain was distributed.[283] $83,747 of that provincial figure came from just two dryland RMs (Clinworth and White Valley) out of sixteen in that region, which suggests that most of the relief aid was being distributed in south-west and west-central Saskatchewan. By 1923, just three RMs in the drybelt region had amassed a combined debt of at least $140,888, the majority of which was money borrowed for relief and operating expenses in consequence of drought and crop failure.[284]

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[278] RM of Big Stick Archives, (Golden Prairie Saskatchewan), "Seed Grain Advances Register, 1919-1920", 2-23.
[279] White Valley Minutes #1, pp 174-175
[280] Ibid., 24 January 1920, 181-183.
[281] Ibid., 21 February 1920, 193.
[282] Ibid., 197.
[283] Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report, 1921, 8; 1922, 5.
[284] This figure was calculated based on the relief aid distributed by the three RMs as stated in the text and from the Transfer Ledgers of the RM of Reno; see also Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Reports, 1923, 31-45.

The financial quick-sand in which the RMs helplessly floundered was the underlying reason why the province under took the "Pay Your Taxes" campaign of 1922. Agriculture and Municipal Affairs Minister Charles Hamilton declared that "local institutions should be the first to be considered when deciding whom to pay."[285] The handy and rather large ad which accompanied the story explained to "financially embarrassed" drylanders that taxes "provide the lifeblood of your community" and that without taxes "your schools would close, road work would cease [and] all community life would come to a standstill."[286] The ad was frighteningly accurate on two of the three consequences: instances of school closure, either temporary or permanent, were characteristic of the crisis; road work did cease; and instead of a standstill, there was an active movement out of the drylands.

The settlers, however, were not terribly concerned about the financial conditions of the RMs. They cared even less about the message of the "Pay Your Taxes" campaign which contained the admonition that "sooner or later all taxes have to be paid, so why not pay yours now."[287] Most settlers were concerned with survival, or, at the very least, mere existence. As such, rules were broken which further complicated an already desperate problem. Instead of handing over, for example, that portion of their crop against which the RMs had registered liens for security, settlers often simply sold their grain to whomever would buy it. This abuse of the relief system prompted the RM of White Valley to issue a proclamation, posted at various points within the district, which "demand[ed] payment [for taxes and relief] and point[ed] out the penalty for disposing of

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[285], "Pay your Taxes," Kindersley *Clarion,* 5 October 1922, 3.
[286] Ibid., 3.
[287] Ibid., 3.

crop while owing for such."[288] Settlers like widower Catherine Slovak provide a fine example. She was conditionally given $485.00 in aid relief from the RM "subject to advice from [her] mortgage company that they are prepared to forestay foreclosure proceedings."[289] The loan company granted its assurance to the RM that it would not foreclose and the RM distributed the aid only to find out later in the year that she had sold her oat stacks to J.M. MacDonald. These stacks were subsequently seized.[290] Council pursued the matter briefly, but, understanding her position and inclined toward leniency, the case was dropped and the stacks remained with MacDonald. The Slovak case illustrates how and why settlers first looked after themselves and why the RM came second. Had Slovak resided in the appropriately named RM of Big Stick, however, her fate might have been different.

Big Stick was a heavily German region which borders on the lonely and brooding Great Sand Hills to the east and a dry, grassed-over lake to the south-west. This particular RM was much more aggressive in temperament than its counterparts in White Valley, Clinworth, or Reno. Big Stick embraced the collection provisions of Section 21 of the *Municipal Relief Act* like no other RM did. Perhaps Big Stick was the very RM that J.N. Bayne had in mind when he informed the Department of Municipal Affairs that "many councils...are putting forth special efforts to improve the financial standing of their Rural Municipalities."[291]

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[288] White Valley Minutes #1, 7 August 1920, 233.
[289] Ibid., 3 April 1920, 210.
[290] Ibid., 4 Feb 1921.
[291] Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report, 1921, 6

Big Stick first approved a by-law which pursued tax collection on land which had already been lost or signed over to companies like Beaver Lumber.[292] Council tried inducements in 1922 during the "Pay Your Taxes" campaign when it pledged to exempt from seizure "not more than 25 percent" of any crop planted with relief seed.[293] With Big Stick carrying a debt of $53,000, council passed a motion to the effect that the "[municipal] collector be instructed to seize and sell anything on [a] farm" whose owner owed taxes or relief debt.[294] Council preceded this motion with a warning posted in the district addressed to "all parties who have received seed grain relief" and which demanded "settlement within two weeks."[295] And, feeling itself working with one hand tied behind its back, Big Stick challenged a provincial tax statute which prohibited the seizure of agricultural equipment between April and September; Big Stick wanted to be enabled "to seize at any time."[296]

At the same time, council was apparently having difficulty keeping track of the number of people leaving the area. Councilor Begley moved a motion which declared "it is the duty of every councilor to report...the name of any settler leaving the district."[297] This frenzy of heightening fiscal aggression and increasing land abandonment was capped off during the long, hot summer of 1922 when council ordered the shooting of two wild horses which were "trespassing" on nearby land and apparently making a "public nuisance" of themselves. Later on at that same meeting, and for shadowy and obscure reasons, the feverish council passed a motion "to shoot the two horses" owned by

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[292] RM of Big Stick Archives, (Golden Prairie, Saskatchewan) "Minutes of RM Meetings, 1920-1923" (hereafter Big Stick Minutes) 4 February 1922.
[293] Ibid., 6 May 1922.
[294] Big Stick Minutes, 5 August 1922.

[295] Ibid.
[296] Ibid., 3 February 1923.
[297] Ibid., 8 July 1922.

the RM as well.[298] In fairness, the high-strung members of the RM of Big Stick were not the only councilors whose frustration had grown commensurate with the crisis. Their reaction to the problem, with the possible exception of the disposal of the RMs horses, was simply a reaction to a problem which RMs were not designed to handle.

White Valley, for example, embarked on an aggressive collection campaign as well, and agreed to "seize [any] implements or buildings on skids" from farms that looked abandoned.[299] Maple Creek similarly voted to "take any necessary action" to collect tax and relief debt.[300] At the peak of the crisis in 1922, Maple Creek councilor E. Suval argued in favor of exerting "the full force of the law" in debt collection and added "no one shall be exempt."[301] The RM of Clinworth also undertook aggressive collection because it was broke. Councilor Thomas Armstrong pointed out, "this municipality cannot carry them [farmers] any longer."[302]

Unlike Big Stick, however, neither Clinworth nor any of the other RMs sought to challenge the tax statute which limited times of property seizure. Councilors backed away from this approach because, as Clinworth's W.R. Ducie explained, "given the circumstances, this [was] not an opportune time to make seizures" except when it was evident that a farm had been abandoned, or, to use the RM's phrase, when a farmer had "absconded."[303] This reluctance to pursue hyper-aggressive collection measures did not prevent Clinworth, however, from taking "immediate action...to protect the interests of

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[298] Ibid., 5 July 1922.
[299] White Valley Minutes # 1, p 288 This seizure from property which "looked abandoned" was the likely cause of the not-infrequent appearance of faulty tax sales, where land or property was mistakenly sold (sales which were subsequently cancelled) from a farmer who had, perhaps following the advice of F.H. Auld, left for "a year or two" to find work.
[300] RM of Maple Creek Archives (Maple Creek Saskatchewan) "Minutes of the RM Meetings" (hereafter Maple Creek Minutes), 7 February 1925.
[301] Ibid., 31 July 1922.
[302] Clinworth Minutes, 5 February 1921.
[303] Clinworth Minutes, 16 September 1924.

the municipalities."[304] It was a fine line between the desire for self-preservation and the desire to help.

Such measured and tempered action also appeared in the RM of Big Stick. Unable to browbeat bankrupt settlers into paying tax and relief debt, Big Stick instead expanded its earlier twenty-five percent seed-relief-crop seizure exemption to fifty-percent. This was an exemption which applied to all exhausted settlers "whose land is under application for title by the municipality."[305] Big Stick also further retreated from its hard-edged, horse-shooting ways when, in a touching motion during the dying days of such ideas, all debts on all lands owned and worked by widows were cancelled.[306]

Municipalities were not the only entities seizing land and property. Companies such as Beaver Lumber were apparently accepting land on debt. Loan companies were busy in the same regard. In some instances, land was free of debt but was simply handed back to the crown as useless: such was the case for Anton Huelskamp of Masonville. As a consequence of these varied threads of bankruptcy, Big Stick urged the province to cancel all non-municipal liens against seized land in 1924 because "a great many quarter sections...are becoming the property of the municipality" and could not be sold at the ubiquitous November Tax Sale until all encumbrances were cleared.[307]

The crisis of the drylands struck at the very heart of municipal life in innumerable ways. White Valley councilors found themselves so "financially embarrassed" that "owing to present conditions" a motion was passed which eliminated all remuneration for council members. They opted instead to be paid only transportation costs to and from

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[304] Ibid.
[305] Big Stick Minutes, 23 March 1923.
[306] Ibid., 3 October 1925.
[307] Ibid., 5 January 1924.

meetings which in 1922 were held at different locations throughout the RM each month.[308] Up north at Clinworth, owing to the present condition of "things in general," council declined to send anyone to the annual convention of the then-infant Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities.[309] Council also cancelled all road work because the RM, at that point, was "cut off from any funds at the bank."[310] North of Clinworth, in the RM of Oakdale (which would lose 250 settlers between 1920 and 1927[311]) the manager of the bank at Coleville boarded the windows, locked the door, and left town in 1922, another sure sign that "things in general" were not good.[312] Apparently the bank felt there was a lack of local business, a reason which the local Grain Growers Association rejected. The GGA, at the same time as it began a search for a new bank, "proteste[ed] against this inefficient system.[313] Likewise the manager of the Union Bank in Lemsford also fled. Clinworth Councilor W.L. Lawton urged council to undertake efforts at attracting another bank because, in an fit of entirely unreasonable optimism, he proclaimed that "municipal accounts alone would make it a success."[314]

The most prevalent and universal ways in which municipalities were affected by the crisis, and also a fine barometer of the overall general financial health of the RMs, was the matter of schools. At one time or another during the crisis, RMs were required to close schools permanently or temporarily, reduce teacher salaries, and amalgamate school districts because of declining population. This problem was shared by dryland

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[308] RM of White Valley Archives, "Minutes Book for RM of White Valley from January 1922-1936" (hereafter White Valley Minutes #2) 3 January 1922, 8.
[309] Clinworth Minutes, 4 February 1922.
[310] Ibid., 1 April 1922.
[311] See attached appendix for the number of settlers who left the Coleville district.
[312] "Coleville Grain Growers after Another Bank," Kindersley *Clarion,* 24 August 1922, 1.
[313] Ibid., 1.
[314] Clinworth Minutes, November 1920.

counterparts in Alberta where the burden of financing schools "threatened the community itself."[315]

Financing education was entirely the responsibility of the RMs. The problem for financing schools was obvious: "the ability of the Municipality to advance the required yearly school payments depend[s] entirely upon its collection of taxes."[316] Schools simply could not operate if the settlers could not pay their taxes and taxes could not be paid if the crop failures and abandonment continued. RM of Reno Secretary Treasurer Lewis Harvey pointed out that it cost roughly $1,000.00 per month to operate a school and asked how it is possible, given the circumstances, to continue funding local education in this way.[317]

Reno set out to solve some of the difficulties associated with financing education by various means. School appropriations were reduced in 1920 which lowered the monthly costs from levels which Harvey believed were "excessive" though no details were given.[318] Long suffering one-room school house teachers in Reno were next to feel the effects of abandonment and crop failure as their salaries were reduced because "the opinion of council seemed to be that there was the possibility of further savings under this item."[319] Reno also took steps to amalgamate its school districts because the population losses had resulted in the maintenance of school districts where there were few children left.

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[315] David C. Jones, "Schools and School Disintegration in the Alberta Dry Belt of the Twenties", *Prairie Forum*, vol.3 no. 1, Spring 1978, 4.
[316] Reno Minutes, Letter-Insert to Minutes, 23 February 1922.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Ibid.
[319] Ibid.

The town of Hatton, north and west of the seat of Reno council at Vidora, experienced the same pressures to alter school district boundaries. Hatton provides a fine window into how the crisis affected not only the RMs but also the struggling towns of the drylands. In 1924, council extended the boundaries of the town's school district further and further afield into the rural areas, trying to replace the children whose parents had fled with the children of settlers who were in the process of leaving.[320]

As they did with relief, most municipalities were obliged to take out lines-of-credit to keep schools open. Big Stick took out a $16,000 loan so it could get money to the schools "as soon as the funds [were] available" during the parched year of 1921.[321] Securing the loan had actually been the result of an earlier failed effort at collecting overdue taxes in late winter 1921. By 1926, even though abandonment was slowing, Big Stick council demanded that the province "enact legislation as will place responsibility for financing the schools on the province as a whole" because, as council tersely indicated, it was "impossible to keep [their] schools open owing to repeated crop failures."[322]

The RM of Maple Creek was forced temporarily to shut down all of its schools during the crisis. Councilor G.H. Hoffman explained that since "the borrowing powers [of the RM] are absolutely exhausted" and furthermore, since council "is at sea as to how to finance [education] until something definite can be ascertained in regards to credit" all

[320] SAB, MA, 11(a), Disorganized Records of the Village of Hatton, 1922-1934", February, also October 1924.
[321] Big Stick Minutes, 2 April 1921.
[322] Big Stick Minutes, 2 February 1926.

schools in the district were shut down in 1922. From November of that year until April 1923, all schools remained closed.[323]

Maple Creek had nine schools to finance, which was not an inexpensive proposition. The Haycreek School, for example, cost $1,000.00 per month, Somerset cost $770.00 and Aylesford, a little more reasonable at $374.48.[324] But for an RM which had to cancel gopher-hunt bounties, these costs were another fiscal mountain council simply did not have the strength to climb. So the RM furnished the School Districts with a list of ratepayers whose taxes were in arrears and urged them to do what they could to collect.[325] Clinworth followed suit in 1924, shutting down all schools in the district from January to March "in view of the adverse conditions and the probable shortage of funds."[326]

The hard-hit RM of Clinworth experienced similar challenges as those faced by other dryland RMs. When, for example, the Holborn school district petitioned both council and the provincial Department of Education for a new school, council had difficulty restraining its impatience with the request which, fittingly, was approved by the Department of Education. Councilors unanimously rejected the idea, noting the proposed school was to be located "on such poor and sandy lands [that there would be] no prospect of ever collecting any taxes."[327] The council also regarded the request to be "another financial burden when the load should be lightened." At this time, in early 1922, Clinworth was carrying debt of $46,637.30. Clinworth also rejected a later request from a school district which wanted to establish a new school at a new site. But council disposed of this idea as well because "the district [was] being depleted of its residents" and added

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[323] Maple Creek Minutes, 25 November 1922.
[324] Ibid., 27 March 1922.
[325] Ibid.
[326] Clinworth Minutes, 2 August 1924.
[327] Ibid., 3 January 1922.

that soon there will be "no children left."[328] The RM of Reno faced the same problem. It wrote the province and asked "whether it [was] necessary to pay school taxes to a district where no school [was] in operation."[329] In this latter case, the children and their families had simply left.

The crisis in the schools, the too-heavy burden of debt, and the structure of the relief system all contributed to a sense of desperation and, finally, near capitulation and surrender. In fact, on the average, it seems to have taken between three and four years, from 1918 to 1922/23, for RMs to be pushed to the breaking point and for dissolution to be openly discussed. Big Stick encapsulated the problems which led to this state of affairs in a 1922 resolution it drafted for the annual S.A.R.M. convention. It reads in part:

> Whereas...land in this and other municipalities in south west Saskatchewan is very poor and unsuited to farming; and whereas...occupants of these lands are unable to make an existence on said lands...Be it resolved [that council petition the Department of Municipal Affairs] to enter into some arrangement with dominion authorities whereby said people be given a chance to locate elsewhere.[330]

This resolution was the result of five years of drought, failure, and pressures created by providing relief. By 1922, in the words of Big Stick council, the failing settlers had become "a burden to the municipality."[331] Big Stick also expressed its frustration with

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[328] Ibid., 24 April 1924.
[329] Reno Minutes, 3 December 1921.
[330] Big Stick Minutes, 4 March 1922.
[331] Ibid. The RM of Clinworth, similarly, sent councilors Thomas Armstrong and F.R. Shortreed to Regina in the early winter of 1921 to see about the "repatriation of settlers [located] on too sandy and rocky lands." See Clinwortrh Minutes, 5 November 1921.

having to provide relief to the drought-stricken settlers. Council said unanimously that they were "strongly opposed to the injustice of the [relief] system."[332]

This state of affairs led to calls for dissolution, a move which would have stripped the RMs of most of their responsibilities. Big Stick Councilors, though, backed away from the idea because they believed "it would not be in the interests of the ratepayers to take a vote against self-government on such short notice."[333]

Reno provides a similar glimpse of what occurred in the drylands at the height of the crisis. Bearing a debt load of some $50,000, angry ratepayers converged on a one-room school house on the heat-ravaged plains of Vidora in mid-summer 1921. The group, whose spokesman was Neils Neilson, passed a motion to the effect that they had "no confidence in the officers of RM 51 [and] call upon the reeve and council of the municipality to resign."[334] This letter was presented to council but was never discussed, at least in an open forum. The RM survived this minor drought-induced revolt long enough to inform the province that council "will not be able to finance applications for relief during the winter" and added that the government should assume the burden.[335] If the intent of Neilson and the others was to force the RM to suspend relief due to fears of bankruptcy, then it was a petition which appeared to have been successful.

Support for dissolution grew quite strong in the RM of White Valley. In September 1921, with the RM staggering under a debt load of over $100,000, council agreed to hold a meeting to discuss dissolution because, simply put, "the expense of self-government

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[332] Ibid., 4 March 1922.
[333] Ibid.
[334] Reno Minutes, Insert, 22 July 1921.
[335] Ibid., 3 December 1921.

can no longer be justified."[336] Since council "cannot be asked to pay bills when funds are not available" it decided that "all applications for relief be denied." Council passed a resolution at that meeting which asked the province "to immediately disorganize this unit as a municipality or in some way arrange that [the debt load] be minimized."[337] While the latter half of this resolution obviously held out the hope that the problem could be remedied, the substance of the resolution reflects the desperation in which the municipalities were mired after being made responsible for a problem far too big for their slender shoulders.

Simply canceling aid was obviously the easiest way to solve the problem and Clinworth took steps to that effect in 1921. Earlier in the crisis in 1920, when it had become clear that the problem did not lessen but in fact grew each year, Clinworth tightened up rules governing aid. Any settler who was approved for aid was granted relief only after being interviewed and questioned by council. By 1921, council moved a motion stopping all relief with the caveat that "only cases of absolute necessity will be considered." [338] Councilor John Buck posted notices to this effect throughout communities within the RM. Big Stick was similarly unable to continue providing relief aid and certainly not road work. Indeed, it encouraged the province "to do road work themselves and allow the ratepayers to work on road [gangs] to enable them to pay their taxes."[339]

While the minutes of the RMs are invaluable for understanding the nature of the crisis and how RMs responded, this source does not speak quite as loudly to the theme of

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[336] White Valley Minutes #2, 286.
[337] Ibid., 286.
[338] Clinworth Minutes, December 1921.
[339] Big Stick Minutes, 2 July 1921.

abandonment as do the tax sale registers. Thousands of parcels of land were seized by municipalities during the course of the crisis because thousands of settlers had far too much money owing against that land. Most of the liens appear to have been registered by the RMs who sought to recover relief costs and tax debt. Tax sales were an essential element in the dryland crisis. The seized land most often represented a failed settler. The revenue generated by the sale of the lands represented one small way that the still-young municipalities could keep themselves solvent and functioning. In many instances, abandoned land was sold for a mere $50 in back taxes. F.H. Auld made the confidential suggestion to a member of the Alberta Survey Board that the crisis had the added benefit of "mak[ing] it easier for those who remain to establish themselves."[340] And, in a way, he was right. Historian Chester Martin argued in 1939 that the size of the average farm in Saskatchewan's pre-emption districts doubled during the 1920s. That growth likely began at the November Tax Sale.

Bearing in mind that much of the tax sale information is incomplete, the records which do remain provide a tantalizing glimpse of economic life and explain, in the most basic way possible, what was actually occurring in the drylands during the 1920s. The records for the RM of Reno, for example, show that between 1921 and 1925, 419 parcels of land were seized and sold by the municipality.[341] This excessive land sale figure means that, conceivably, 419 settlers abandoned their lands between this time period where the *Annual Reports* for the Department of Municipal Affairs indicate no population

[340] SAB, R-261, F23-1-1, Auld to G.R. Murdoch, 14 November 1921.
[341] RM of Reno Archives, "Tax Sale and Redemption Record, 1921-1925" (missing front cover and bearing no identifying marks) the 419 figure derives from a calculation of the total tax sale entries in this log.

movement at all in that RM.[342] This obscure picture is enhanced somewhat by the incomplete collection files of the Department of Municipal Affairs which include relief collection cases for the Vidora district in the RM of Reno.

E.E. Erikson fled to the south-east corner of Saskatchewan, near Kennedy, just about as far away from the drylands as one can get in Saskatchewan and still farm. He rented the land he left behind to a neighbor. Erikson had $1,500 in various liens registered against his land and the province tracked him down, demanded payment, and threatened legal proceedings if the debt was not cleared.[343] Erikson explained to the province that he could not afford to repay because of crop failure though he promised to give the Department a payment when he could. The Erikson case demonstrates the nub of the problem. He had suffered "five years in succession without a crop" which is another way of saying he had made no money off the land since he began farming it.[344] The correspondence stops with an empty promise to pay. In 1926, with the tenant farmer now gone and the land going back to prairie, the file closes with one word: "abandoned."

The list of the collection agent goes on and it retains a certain ghostly quality: Paul Thack of Vidora, section 9-3-36-3, "back to the United States"; Wilson James of Govenlock, 21-2-29-3, "abandoned"; section 22-2-39-3, "abandoned"; section 27-2-29-3, "crop failure"; section 1-3-29-3, "no answer to my letter"; section 35-2-29-3, "this man is gone."[345] A widow who hung on scraping a desperate existence off her farm near the non-existence town of Lonesome Butte, found her life "very hard" according to the province's

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[342] Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Reports, 1921, 25-39 and 1926 16-21. The numbers of this Department suggest there was no population movement. At the very least, the tax-sale figure indicates at least some population movement occurred.
[343] SAB, MA-3, Records of the Department of Municipal Affairs, "Seed Feed and Relief: 1921-1924", J.J. Smith to E. Erikson, 12 October 1921.
[344] Ibid., Erickson to Smith, 17 October 1921.
[345] Ibid.

oddly sympathetic collection agent. He added, "there will be no payment on this [debt] at all this year. Perhaps not at any time."[346]

Hugh MacDonald was likewise chased by the province's collection agents but informed them he could not pay because, like Erikson, he "hasn't received a cent off that land since 1916."[347] The file on section 20-3-26-3 closes out four years later in 1926: "land abandoned; should be forfeited."

Just east of Vidora, in the tiny community of Senate, entire groups of people fled en masse from the dry lands. E.H. Lloyd led the effort to remove forty-six of his fellow Welshman and their families from the Senate region because of drought and failure. They were removed, with government aid, to an area north of Tisdale where they either rented or purchased land. According to the CNR land agent, "they seem to be well satisfied with the country and the people."[348] Thus, considering the tax sales, the collection files and the Senate group, a conservatively estimated 629 people (husband, wife, and child) left RM # 51 between 1921 and 1926.

Tax seizures/sales closely followed the arc of crop failure. In the town of Maple Creek, for example, just six lots were sold at tax sale in 1915-16, whereas sixty-seven were sold in 1914/15.[349] 1914 was the year the first total crop failure hit the south-west. In 1920, the sale figure climbs back up to forty-five. Council responded accordingly when it reduced the cost of lots in Maple Creek by fifty-percent before the seizures climbed to fifty-five in 1923, spiking at 103 in 1924.[350] It is of interest to consider the

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[346] Ibid.
[347] Ibid., MacDonald to Smith, 29 October 1922.
[348] SAB, Ag., 2.7, Papers of the Department of Agriculture, "Correspondence re: Movement of Settlers, 1922-1925," Eastfield to Auld, 25 July 1923.
[349] Town of Maple Creek Archives, (Maple Creek, Saskatchewan) "Tax Sale and Redemption Record, 1915-1925" (hereafter MC Tax Records) 1-3.
[350] Ibid., 12-21.

names of the purchasers of lands at these tax sales. G. Blythman, the owner of the still-existent and flourishing local real estate firm in Maple Creek, was a prominent buyer of these lands, as were some members of the RM council itself. The tax sale records also corroborate the population losses estimated by the Department of Municipal Affairs: between 1920 and 1926, the town of Maple Creek lost 520 people.[351]

In some cases, the tax sale registry is unavailable or non-existent. In this instance it is helpful to consider the number of tax cancellations, mentioned in the Minutes of the RM meetings, and which, similar to tax sales, indicate that a property has been abandoned or forfeited in some fashion. The RM of White Valley cancelled taxes on 140 parcels of land between 1920 and 1924, noting beside some entries that the place had been "abandoned."[352] Big Stick council minutes also reveal what would be found in the tax sale registries if they were available. In one week in 1926, council approved the sale of ten parcels of land seized earlier by the RM. On another arbitrary date, April 1927, nine seized parcels were sold.[353]

The long dissolved RM of Royal Canadian in the Eatonia district seized and sold 426 parcels of land between 1924 and 1927.[354] In many instances, the land was simply signed over or "purchased" by the municipality. Oftentimes, the land was bought by prominent members of the community. The name of the physician for Eatonia shows up frequently at the RMs tax sales. But it was not always the usual suspects purchasing land.

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[351] Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Reports, 1921 26-33; 1926, 26-39. Historian Barry Potyondi notes that the Maple Creek district experienced a sixty-two percent homestead failure rate, with thirty two percent abandoning their farms between 1920 and 1930. In Palliser's Triangle: living in the grassland's, 1870-1930 (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1995) 93. The tax-sale records for the RM of Maple Creek were unavailable.

[352] See for example, White Valley Minutes #1, 5 June 1920, 230-232.

[353] Big Stick Minutes, 2 October 1926; 2 April 1927.

[354] RM of Chesterfield Archives, (Eatonia Saskatchewan) "RM of Royal Canadian: Lands Sold and Redemption Record, 1924 to 1932" 1-20.

At $50 per quarter section, or about $3 per acre the tax sales were, in their own way, very democratic. Low-wage earners such as Mantario teacher Vera Turner, Eatonia Nurse Miss K. Crimp, and Ferryman William Cleghorn all purchased land at these sales.[355] Cleghorn worked the ferry at Estuary, a town which nestled the banks of the South Saskatchewan River west of Leader. Between 1920 and 1927 that small community lost 302 people.[356] Today, aside from a few houses and a cement encased bank vault, nothing of the town remains. In some instances entire houses were purchased for a pittance at these sales. G. Schneider bought a house in Clinworth RM for $175.00 on the quarter located at 4-19-24-3.[357]

For many people, the sales offered a chance to increase land holdings, whatever the cost. Bessarabian immigrant Gottlieb Anhorn, for example, had a wife and five children and being from south-Russia had few places to go when the crisis hit. So, in the spirit of the pioneer Anhorn made the best of a bad situation and "in the year 1925, when neighboring farmers began to move away owing to poor crop conditions, Mr. Anhorn bought and leased additional land."[358]

Using tax sales as a barometer still has limits for it does not take into account all of the land seized. Recall the RM of Big Stick trying to wrest a tax debt out of a parcel of land which had been seized by the Beaver Lumber Company. Clinworth councilors were trying to sell land that had been seized or let back to the Department of Interior. Council wrote to the Department of Interior in 1924 and asked that liens be removed against fourteen parcels of land because the encumbrances were blocking the RM's attempts to

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[355] Ibid., see "Purchaser" columns.
[356] Saskatchewan, Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Reports, 1920 26-37; 1926, 26-33.
[357] Clinworth Minutes, 1 November 1926.
[358] Prairie Echoes of Hatton: a story of Hatton Saskatchewan and surrounding area (no publisher, 1983) 3.

sell this land.[359] Unable to resist a parting shot, Councilor James Wardell kindly pointed out the Department had an obligation to cancel the liens because "in the first instance [these lands] should have never been settled."[360]

A total but still highly incomplete count of the tax sale activity outlined above reveals a calculated estimate of 1,400 parcels of land being seized or abandoned and then sold. This represents activity in just six municipalities out of sixteen RMs, and does not include the records for the towns or for the dozen or so Local Improvement Districts in the drylands. Ultimately, Auld was correct: the crisis did have the practical effect of making it easier for those who remained behind to establish themselves.

The resources of the RMs reveal three striking and crucial elements. First, population losses become more severe when the tax sale records are consulted. The records of the Department of Municipal Affairs and the Department of Agriculture do not show any population change at all for the RMs of Big Stick, Reno and White Valley during the crisis. Yet the tax sale records for these RMs reveal there was a significant change of ownership in land which clearly supports the conclusion that the dryland crisis involved not hundreds but thousands of instances of abandonment.

Second, the RM minutes demonstrate precisely how and why the province's actions during the Dirty Thirties depression were so speedy and efficient. The crisis of the 1920s reduced dryland RMs to beggar districts which could scarcely finance aid, schools, infrastructure or telephones. In the case of the RM of Clinworth, it could not even afford "boots and shoes" for certain of its residents. The experience of the RMs in

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[359] Clinworth Minutes, 16 September 1924.
[360] Ibid.

the 1920s explains how and why the province stepped up and shouldered the burden of relief in the 30s.

Third, much of the detail on the crisis available in the minutes of the RMs comes from the years between 1919 and 1922. And since provincial records suggest that the abandonment began in 1923 it is reasonable to conclude that the actual abandonment of the drylands began at precisely that moment when all aid was cut off. Interior Minister Frank Oliver, in 1908, engineered the settlement of the drylands based upon the idea that 320 acres of land would be enough for settlers to make a decent living. The thousands who fled the drylands in the 1920s and 1930s prove the point that his policy was a failure.

Conclusion:

"I wanna leave you feeling breathless, show you how the west was won."

- Sheryl Crow, "Steve McQueen"

The dryland crisis of 1917-1927 contains two central implications. First, the dryland crisis influenced the actions of the province in the Dirty Thirties. The Saskatchewan government had watched its south-west and west-central Rural Municipalities choke on a mountain of debt amidst the backdrop of repetitive crop failure and abandonment between 1917 and 1927. The province belatedly understood that it could not handle the Dirty Thirties in the same fashion as it did the Dryland Crisis. But for as much as the Saskatchewan government's intellectual assumptions were challenged by the crisis, administrators and department officials did not come quickly or easily to the conclusion that the province should respond to the Dirty Thirties in a different fashion. The end of the dryland crisis did not mean that the province experienced a perception change.

As late as 1926, Deputy Agriculture Minister F.H. Auld felt that abandonment should not really come as a surprise. In a radio address delivered in the winter of 1926, Auld claimed that the very quality of the settlers themselves dictated that abandonment be the rule not the exception. Auld examined the homestead entry records of Montana, records which included the previous occupations of its settlers, and from there drew parallels with the Saskatchewan experience. In Auld's view, Montana was settled by people who should not have been farming in the first place: along with the doctors,

lawyers and clerks who tried to farm, settlers also included in their ranks "2 deep sea divers"; "1 world rover"; and "2 wrestlers".[361] Making breathtaking leaps of logic, Auld concluded that "under these conditions, need we be surprised if there have been some failures [in Saskatchewan]."[362] But what he failed to consider is that while adventurers and drifters certainly made up a not insignificant part of the early settlement years, many of those who abandoned their homesteads during the 1920s were either those who had initially settled the region in the early days or who had come up in the years after 1915. Anton Huelskamp of the RM of Mantario was an average example: he farmed in the region for six years before he was beaten-to-staggering by the heat in 1923.

It might be argued that the abandonment was, in part, linked to the propensity for settlers to "stake all on one crop." Auld certainly believed that the pursuit of cash through heat crops was one of the problems which perpetuated the abandonment and "when that crop failed the year's operations were a total loss."[363] Auld had always fervently supported diversification: cows, poultry, hogs, "even some bees." "Our slogan", he wistfully told a radio audience in the winter of 1926, "might well be 'a sideline on every farm.'"[364] There is much truth Auld's assertion that it was neither wise nor good farming to grown wheat to the exclusion of all else.

But what Auld did not acknowledge, however, were the results of a Department of Agriculture report from 1925 which pointed out the costs of diversification. The committee listed just six of the most hopelessly obvious reason to diversify, such as "increased income," but it found eleven formidable reasons which would prevent

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[361] SAB, R-5-9, Papers of F.H. Auld, "An Agricultural Policy for Saskatchewan", Radio Address, 22 November, 1926, 3.
[362] Ibid., 1, 4.
[363] Ibid.,10.
[364] Ibid., 10.

diversification. These reasons included the high costs associated with purchasing cattle or chickens; the money required to adapt existing infrastructure; and the high cost of the equipment associated with diversification.[365] For settlers whose average yield per bushel between 1917 and 1927 lay in the five to ten bushels per acre range, diversification sounded good but it simply remained a mirage.

It was a different Auld who spoke in 1934. Knowing that the province had by that time contributed $31,000,000 in relief aid to farmers Auld admitted that legendary abandonment of the Thirties "could have been avoided by land settlement policy which would have prevented occupancy of sub-marginal lands."[366] In this one comment Auld finally removed the blame from settlers who, he had claimed in 1926, had chosen their lands unwisely. Auld admitted that there existed a tract of land unsuitable to agriculture, as farming methods stood in the first third of the twentieth century. There was also the sense that Auld might even be inclined toward viewing the crisis of the 1920s through a different lens by 1934. He capitulated: "we must, finally, judge a locality on its ability to sustain life."[367]

Auld's boss in the Department of Agriculture and former head of the Swift Current experimental farm, J.G. Taggart, was more emphatic than his underling when, in the closing days of the Dirty Thirties, he noted there were thirty-three million acres of land under cultivation in Saskatchewan, sixteen million of which were sub-marginal: "this land should be taken out of production and kept out of production."[368]

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[365] Ibid., "The Mixed Farming Committee Report", 14 February, 1925 2-8.
[366] Ibid., "Some Problems Relating to the Use of Sub-Marginal Lands", Public Address, 1934, 2.
[367] Ibid., 1.
[368] Ibid., "The Problem of Saskatchewan" Public Address, J.G. Taggart, 1939, 1.

The difference between good, marginal, and sub-marginal land is clear and distinct. The federal government, thirty-eight years after Oliver's 1908 amendment, commissioned a land classification study of all the land east of Shaunovan and south of Maple Creek in 1946. The report contained worrying but by then widely understood facts. Seventy-two percent of the land in the Maple Creek district, for example, was characterized as Class One land, which was not merely marginal land, but sub-marginal. This land had an average selling price of $3.21 per acre. That price was roughly equivalent to the cost-per-acre of land settled under the amendment to the Dominion Lands Act in 1908 and was also roughly equivalent to the cost-per-acre of many of the parcels of land sold at tax sales. In other words, land value in this portion of the drylands remained the same over a thirty-eight year period.[369]

Even more discouraging was the amount of "good land" the committee found. Land in the Maple Creek district, for example, categorized as Class Four (the best) amounted to only five-percent of the region's total; it sold for $16.08 per acre. The authors of the University of Saskatchewan study concluded that seventy percent of the land in the entire study-region, from the American Border to Maple Creek and from Eastend to Alberta, was sub-marginal. In practical terms, this meant "low arability, rough topography, stoniness, and other unfavorable characteristics."[370] These characteristics combined to make agriculture in this district "extremely hazardous."

The authors of the study had the reasonably calm year of 1946 as their vantage point and from that high ground they looked back down through the past thirty-eight years. They gazed across time at the wreckage of the Dirty Thirties, the crisis of the

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[369] Ibid., "An Economic Classification of Lands in the Govenlock-Eastend-Maple Creek Area" (Canada: Department of Agriculture, 1946), 11-13.
[370] Ibid., 7, 9-11.

1920s, and the warm-up period between 1908-1914, and discerned one important pattern: "over large areas of land, periods of uncertainty of crop yields and farm returns have been reflected by the several stages of abandonment of land and farmsteads, re-settlement and re-abandonment."[371]

Both south-east Alberta and south-west west-central Saskatchewan suffered from this pattern of abandonment and re-abandonment and yet the reaction of both provinces was as distinct as the arbitrary border between the two. Historian David Jones estimated that 17,000 people either abandoned or were evacuated from their homesteads during the 1920s. Historian James Gray added that this exodus was, in part, encouraged because Alberta had a vigorous and aggressive re-settlement policy while Saskatchewan obviously did not.[372] F.H. Auld continued to the very end to resist any such re-settlement plan when he explained that he does not favor "such wholesale methods of dealing with [the problem] in Saskatchewan" but instead wanted to evacuate "smaller areas which in themselves are quite definitely inferior."[373]

There is an intriguing point here: perhaps there was some form of calculated reasoning behind Auld's cold and abstract handling of the crisis. After all, it could be argued that the reasonably healthy population numbers of present-day south-west and west-central Saskatchewan simply reflect Auld's determination to force and compel the drylands to survive even at the cost of seeming indifferent and uncaring; he and his department officials tried to ensure the success of Saskatchewan as a wheat growing province. South-east Alberta on the other hand, with the exemption of the ridiculously green and vibrant city of Medicine Hat, is virtually empty and this stark absence of life

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[371] Ibid., 2.
[372] James H. Gray, Men against the Desert, (Saskatoon: Western Producer Books, 1978), 16.
[373] SAB, R-5-9, "Some Problems...", 2.

reflects that province's wholesale treatment of the crisis. Historian David Jones noted that the admirable Premier Greenfield was "determined to save the capsizing south or go under with her."[374] The same can certainly not be said about Dunning, Auld and the Saskatchewan government. Indeed at times it seemed that the province did not particularly care much at all about the settlers caught in the grip of the dryland crisis.

The second crucial implication of the Dryland Crisis concerns historiography. Historians have generally steered away from trying to discover meaning in the crisis. David Jones briefly offers the idea that the dryland crisis "demand[s] much rethinking about the nature of that decade" but he does not pursue the idea.[375] Historians Ian MacPherson and John Herd Thompson agree with Jones and explain that the dryland crisis undermines the popular impression of the 1920s which "exaggerate[s] the well being of prairie agriculture before the depression."[376] That tendency stretches back to historian James H. Gray who argued that "good crop followed good crop from 1922 until 1928." [377] This assessment obviously cannot be the case since 1922 to 1928 were precisely the years during which the abandonment crisis was at its peak in both Alberta and Saskatchewan. It does not follow that settlers would abandon land in the midst of general agricultural prosperity.

As stated at the beginning and demonstrated throughout this thesis, the crisis of the 1920s was simply the second act in a three-act tragedy which began in 1908 and

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[374] Jones, "We'll all be Buried", 192; Jones, Empire, 215.
[375] Jones, Empire, 220.
[376] Ian MacPherson and John Herd Thompson, "The Rural Prairie West, the Dirty Thirties and the Historians" Unpublished address delivered at a joint session of the Canadian Historical Association/American Historical Association, Winnipeg, 1986.
[377] Gray, Men Against the Desert, 16.

continued with monotonous, devastating persistence until 1939.[378] There were three distinct stages of abandonment. This scenario differs not only in degree but also in kind from the settlement experience of other regions in Saskatchewan which did not undergo similar prolonged crises. The important questions are: what was the exception, what was the rule, and what does that mean? In south-west and west-central Saskatchewan, the rule was abandonment and failure while the exception, as shown in the years 1909, 1915, 1916, 1922, 1923 and 1928 was success. Charitably calculated, there were between six and eight years of relative success during the entire thirty-one-year period from 1908 to 1939. Historian James Gray argued that the worst of the Dirty Thirties was limited in its most serious effects to the wider dry land region between Moose Jaw and Calgary. Imagine, then, drought as an energy which had its core along the border between south-west Saskatchewan and south-east Alberta. From 1908 to 1939, that pulse radiated its energy in an ever-widening circle of destruction and culminated in the legendary havoc of the Thirties.

It is important to mention in passing that there were a significant number of settlers who did not abandon their land during the crisis of the 1920s. These were men and women who likely had the resources and the time to develop their agricultural skills in such a demanding environment. It is also likely that they settled on some of the more productive land in the region.

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[378] This statement demands that popular conceptions about settlement history be wholly reevaluated. Attempts at "re-engineering" popular perception have already begun, for example, at the Medicine Hat Museum. Two years ago (and based largely on the strength of the work by Historian David C. Jones) Museum curators re-worked their exhibit and re-drew time boundaries: the Depression portion of the exhibit is now defined as occurring between 1915 and 1939.

As a consequence of the crisis, settlement history must be separated into two distinct and unique blocks of time, each with different causes and effects.[379] The settlement policy of Clifford Sifton was rooted in the nation building politics of 19th century Canada; Frank Oliver's settlement policy was not. Sifton steered settlement away from the drylands; Oliver did not. Sifton is associated in the popular mind with bringing the "settler in a sheepskin coat" to the west; Oliver is not. The regions settled under the policy of Sifton were successfully farmed with little incident; the regions settled by Oliver were not. The roots and inspiration for the settlement plans of both men lay in uniquely different soil and each policy had its own unique results of which the crisis of the 1920s serves as a fine example.

That drought and crop failure was the rule and not the exception is proven by more recent occurrences. In May 2004, drought threatened the drylands once again. There were reports of barbed-wire fences completely covered with blowing sand and dirt in the Kindersley district.[380] Young farmer Tim Lyons said he had never seen the situation this bad; the land, he observed, was "just powder."[381] At Brock, it had not rained for a year. Farmer Earl Jackson tried to put a positive spin on the looming crisis saying "every year is a challenge," though he acknowledged that "a lot of young people this year are saying to heck with it [and leaving]."[382]

Jackson puts his finger on an important point. The young people who are saying "to heck with it" are a historical echo of those settlers who abandoned their land in the

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[379] Pierre Berton's history of settlement (and also the least well written of his 4 books on the Canadian west) The Promised Land: settling the west, 1896-1914 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984) provides a fine example of how the popular mind came to identify settlement as one block of time.
[380] "Drought Situation Worst in Decades" Kindersley *Clarion*, 5 May 2004, 7A.
[381] Ibid.
[382] Ibid.

early settlement years. The stakes are much less today than they were then, but the impulse is the same and it is driven by the same pressures. Perhaps Captain John Palliser was right; perhaps the land was unfit for agriculture. Certainly, depopulation has affected all of Saskatchewan and indeed all of rural Canada. But very few areas have a history so completely tied up in land abandonment and this tends to support the conclusion that the experience of the drylands was different not in degree but in kind. Communities like Kindersley, Leader, and Fox Valley are turning more and more to oil; turning more and more to what's underneath the dirt than the dirt itself. Hatton is the site of extensive oil exploration. And even though the province of Saskatchewan, in cooperation with the federal government, finally moved in 1935 to deal with the consequences of the Dominion Lands amendment through the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, the depopulation of the region continues to this day.

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The following three pages of Appendices provide the numbers which explain the scope of the crisis. The figures from 1921 show the population numbers for Rural Municipalities in the drylands as the crisis reached its critical point. The figures from 1927 show the population figures for the Rural Municipalities at the end of the crisis as the Dirty Thirties was poised to strike; and the figures for the communities show the population figures for the towns within the dryland region as defined in this study for the same years, 1921 and 1927.

Determining the exact number of people lost is impossible and so the following numbers are only meant to provide a guideline. I have extracted the very conservative ten thousand estimate from the number of "Resident Farmers" who abandoned their land (3,542), and added a wife and child. This, I felt, was an adequate estimate considering what the records say on this matter. There is no single figure for population losses. The Canada Census, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Municipal Affairs, and the records of the Rural Municipalities all provide different numbers. These records will obviously be influenced by the abandonment numbers gleaned from tax sale registries. There are 16 RMs in the drylands; I consulted the tax sale registries of five.

1921

Rural Municipality	"Resident Farmers"	RM Population
#18- Lonetree	500	80
#19 Frontier	350	800
#49- White Valley	360	960
#51- Reno	400	1,500
#78- Grassy Creek	450	1,400
#79 Arlington	1,000	3,200
#109- Carmichael	350	1,250
#110- Piapot	350	1,450
#111- Maple Creek	369	1,200
#139- Gull Lake	600	1,300
#141- Big Stick	210	600
#142- Bitter Lake	300	1,200
#169- Pittville	650	2,600
#171- Keebleville	558	1,300
#172- Enterprise	437	1,100
#230- Clinworth	750	1,784
#231- Happyland	900	3,500
#232- Deer Forks	350	2,100
#261- Royal Canadian	750	2,500
#262- Mantario	537	1,500
#266- Newcombe	430	1,320
#290- Kindesley	700	1,200
#291- Elma	350	700
#292- Milton	400	1,200
#320- Oakdale	500	
	Total: 12,551	**Total: 36,464**

Source: Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report, 1921 26-33.

1927

Rural Municipality	"Resident Farmers"	RM Population
#18- Lonetree	350	1,300
#19- Frontier	275	850
#49- White Valley	400	1,161
#51- Reno	400	843
#78- Grassy Creek	450	1,200
#79- Arlington	400	1,444
#109- Carmichael	350	1,406
#110- Piapot	240	1,075
#111- Maple Creek	227	972
#139- Gull Lake	460	1,600
#141- Big Stick	220	950
#142- Bitter Lake	210	850
#169- Pittville	538	1,863
#171 Keebleville	400	1,300
#172- Enterprise	207	853
#230- Clinworth	331	1,364
#231- Happyland	1,000 (700 in 1928)	4,311
#232- Deer Forks	305	1,563
#261- Royal Canadian	265	870
#262- Mantario	212	900
#266- Newcombe	430	1,425
#290- Kindersley	560	1,685
#291- Elma	200	889
#292- Milton	160	750
#320- Oakdale	419 (250 in 1928)	750
	Total: 9,009	**Total: 32,174**
	Total Loss: 3,542	**Total Loss: 4,290**

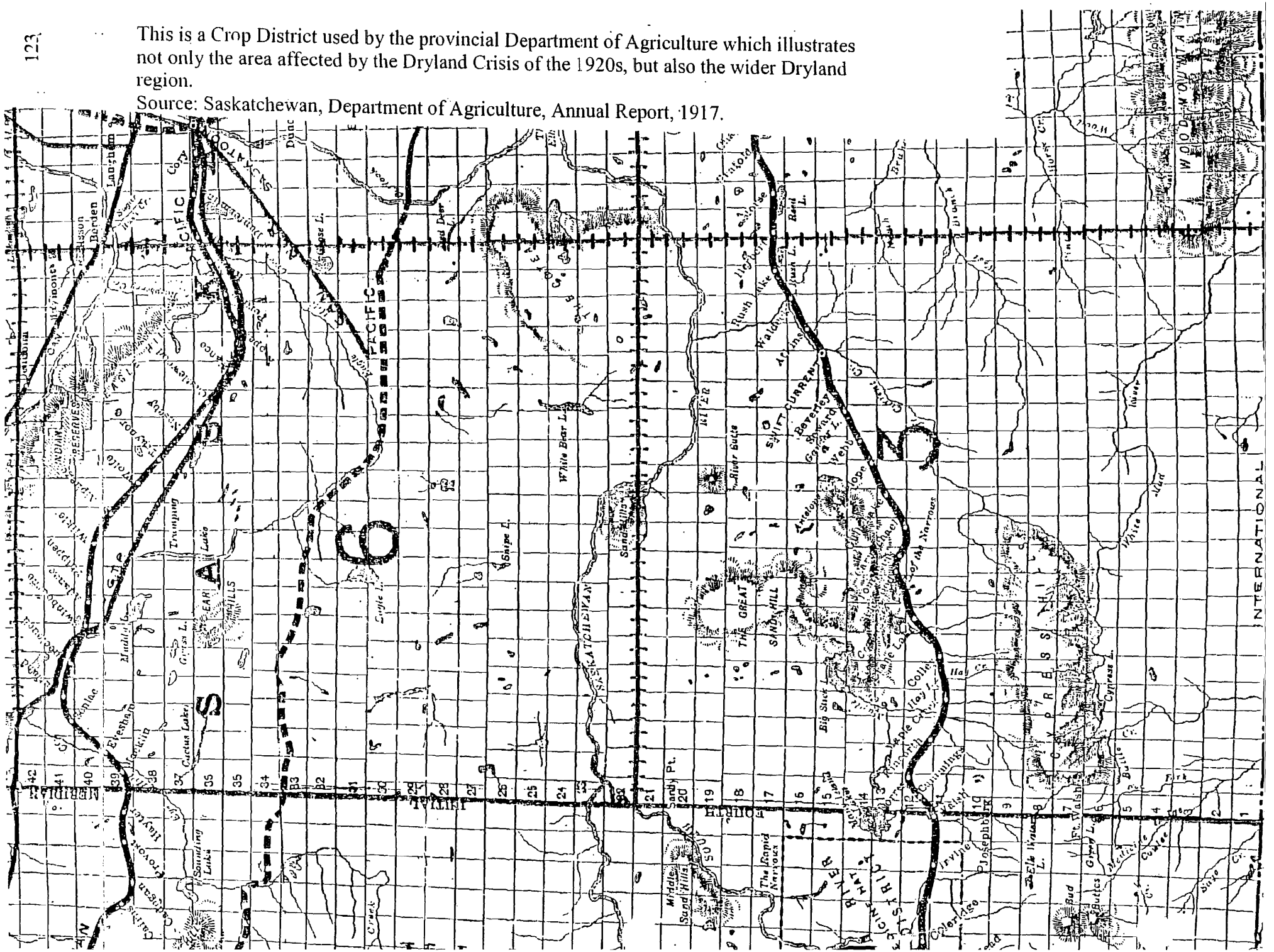
Source: Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report: 1927 16-21· 1928 15-30.

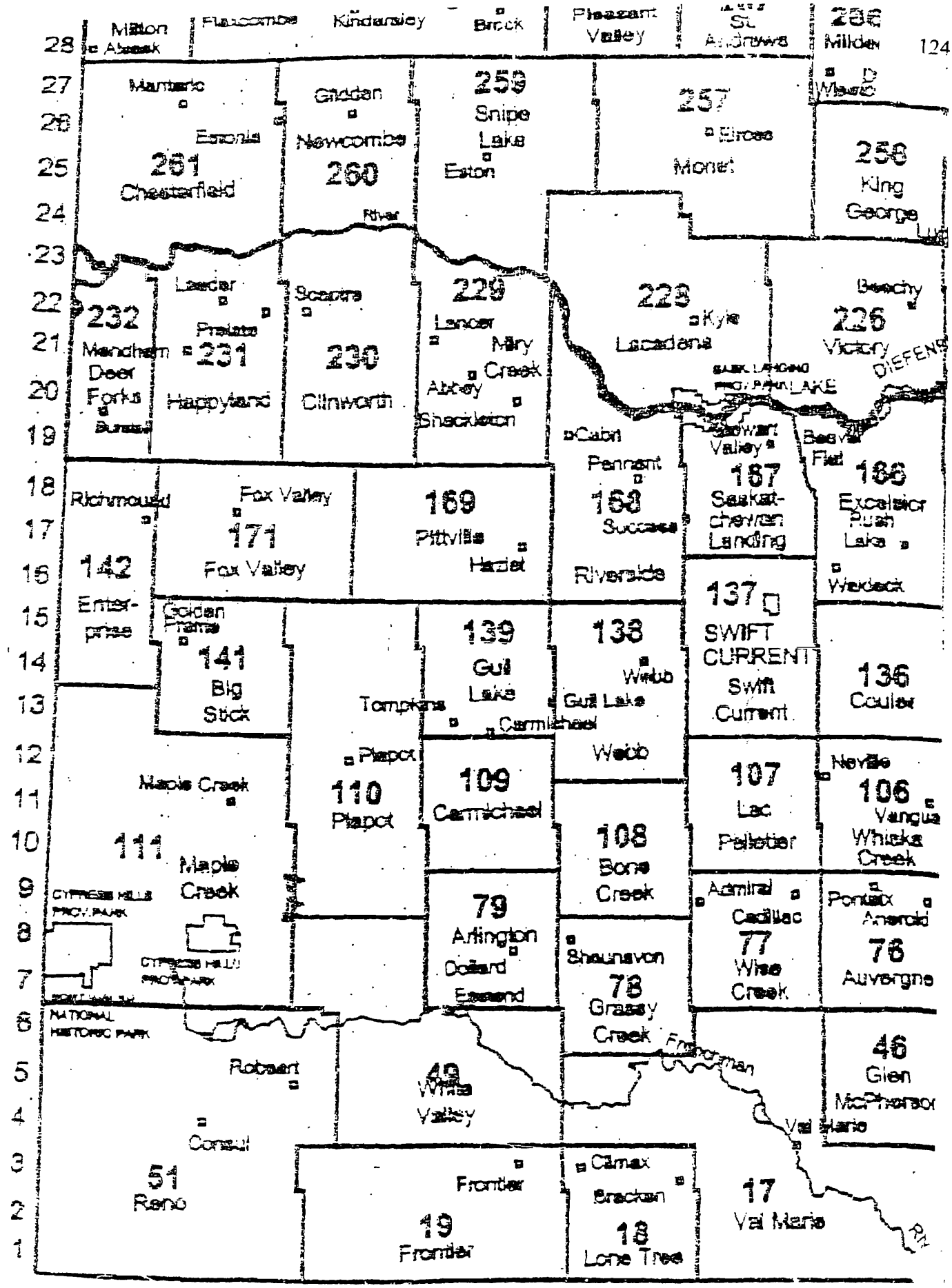
Dryland Communities	1921 Population	1927 Population
- Alsask	455	292
- Burstall	179 (1922)	178 (1928)
- Carmichael	75	86
- Consul	46	63
- Dollard	125	153
- Eastend	625	420
- Eatonia	265 (1922)	226
- Estuary	400	98
- Hatton	350	122
- Lancer	150	131
- Leader	1,200	526
- Mantario	60	50
- Maple Creek	1,450	930
- Marengo	120	109
- Piapot	180	230
- Portreeve	75	80
- Prelate	450	403
- Robsart	104	96
- Sceptre	200	232
- Tompkins	450	266
- Vidora	45	63
	Total: 7,004	**Total: 4,754**
		Total Loss: 2,250

Source: Department of Municipal Affairs, Annual Report: 1921 26-33; 1922 37-45; 1924 34-44; 1927 51-62

This is a Crop District used by the provincial Department of Agriculture which illustrates not only the area affected by the Dryland Crisis of the 1920s, but also the wider Dryland region.

Source: Saskatchewan, Department of Agriculture, Annual Report, 1917.





This is an enlargement of a current Rural Municipality map showing the general location of the RMs under study. Note the size of RMs 290; 261; 110; 51; 111. These RMs amalgamated with adjoining RMs which were no longer able to function as

The shaded region represents the area which the Pope Commission recommended be closed off to settlement.
Source: Report of the Ranching and Grazing Investigation Commission, (Ottawa: Department of Interior, 1913)